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A WOMAN IN IT

A SKETCH OF FEMININE MISADVENTURE

By "RITA"

AUTHOR OF "PEG THE RAKE," "DAPHNE," "FRAGOLETTA," "ADRIAN LYLE," "FAUSTINE," ETC.

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They talk about a Woman's sphere as if it had a limit.
There's not a place in earth or heaven,
There's not a task to mankind given,
There's not a blessing or a woe,
There's not a whisper—Yes or No,
There's not a life, or death, or birth,
That has a feather-weight of worth,
Without—a Woman in it!

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
	INTRODUCTORY	9
I.	WHAT'S TO BE DONE?	11
II.	THE MIRROR TO NATURE	25
III.	"SORTS AND CONDITIONS OF MEN"	36
IV.	SUCCESS!	46
V.	THROUGH THE POST	56
VI.	FEMININE SPARRING	67
VII.	WHAT THE DIARY SAYS	69
VIII.	QUICKSANDS	75
IX.	SOCIAL AND SOCIABLE	81
X.	A STORM BREWING	91
XI.	THE STORM BURSTS	103
XII.	AN INTERLUDE	118
XIII.	ARTIFICE	131
XIV.	FEELING THE PULSE OF DANGER	137
XV.	VICTORY	148
XVI.	PRO BONO PUBLICO	158
XVII.	A RENCONTRE	168
XVIII.	AN AWKWARD MEETING	178
XIX.	REMORSE	188
XX.	TRUTH IN A LIE!	201
XXI.	A TANGLED WEB	214
XXII.	A PLUNGE INTO FRESH WATERS	228
XXIII.	ROMANCE VERSUS REALITY	239
XXIV.	A FATE IN THE BALANCE	250
XXV.	THE DIARY ENDS	259
XXVI.	TWO WOMEN IN IT	267
XXVII.	"YES!"	279

INTRODUCTORY.

"To M.....

"Coombe Abbot, Devon.

"My Dear M.....,

"When you first submitted the details of Mrs. Noel Grey's career to me and asked if they would not 'work into a novel,' I shook my head at the idea, and declared that the world of critics and readers would pronounce her 'impossible.' But our many talks on the subject invested the character with a certain fascination, and to those talks and that fascination you are indebted for this sketch—as I call it. Her life was a series of misadventures, and the incidents of her erratic career were all more or less unfinished and incomplete. In this lay the difficulty of the story. The reading public—so I am assured—loves an 'ending' to a book. Well, this story does not lend itself to an ending either by matrimony or death—the two most final subjects for a novel. But such as it is you have begged me to publish it in remembrance of many pleasant talks and discussions that certainly bore out the title. There was always a 'woman'

in them—the woman who lives in these pages clothed in modern dress, and as much 'up to date' as circumstances permit. Whether other people will judge her as charitably as ourselves remains to be seen, but their appreciation—or the reverse—cannot alter our joint indebtedness to her and to each other.'

"RITA."

A WOMAN IN IT.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

MRS. NOEL GREY was at her wit's end for the hundred and first time in her eventful life.

Unfortunately the frequency of misfortune does not ameliorate its unpleasantness, and the present heroine of misadventure found memory but poor consolation.

She was reviewing past troubles, and her methods of surmounting them, with more tendency to hopelessness than mirth, and with a capital limited to twenty pounds, an excellent stock of dresses and a *decree nisi* staring her in the face.

In fact, Mrs. Noel Grey was the victim of adverse fate and a stupid jury.

The Law has conferred inestimable benefits on mankind, but the Law has not yet succeeded

in satisfying applicants for justice that a lost case is ever their own fault. Either the judge or the jury is to blame. In a question of damages the fault embraces the whole legal profession. They are deservedly unpopular and undeservedly—necessary.

Mrs. Noel Grey was discoursing on the subtle difference between immorality and flightiness. The inability to detect this subtle difference on the part of twelve honest unadulterating tradesmen had just lost her her case.

"You see, dear," she was saying to her friend and confidante, Lucretia Gabwell, "I am perfectly innocent. Isn't it shameful that a woman can't get justice because she's been just a little—a little——"

"Imprudent?" suggested Miss Gabwell, glancing up from a pile of table-cloths she was mending.

"Well—let us say imprudent. I suppose it looked like—that, Lutie?"

"It looked," said her friend, uncompromisingly—"even a little worse than—that."

Mrs. Noel Grey's fine eyes flashed—then grew reproachful.

"*Et tu*, Brute?" she murmured, drawing out a black-bordered handkerchief. She had

dressed her "Case" in mourning for two excellent reasons. One, a last chance of credit at Peter Robinson's—the other, a desire to look interesting before the twelve uncompromising arbiters of her fate. It had been quite useless, and the glories of a banking account were eclipsed by the injustice of Law.

"I never knew," she continued plaintively, "how perfectly *atrocious* quite simple actions might be made to look till I heard that awful man describe them! If *that's* the use of legal phraseology——"

"It accounts," murmured Miss Gabwell, "for the success of men who use it."

"Exactly. Oh dear, how unfortunate I am, Lutie! I must have been born under an unlucky star—conjunction of Mars or Venus or something! Marriage is certainly a failure, an *awful* failure. The whole system wants remodelling. Don't you think so?"

Miss Gabwell sighed over a difficult darn she was attempting.

"Well, Nina," she said slowly, "you see I'm hardly in a position to say. I suppose marriage is a trial—but it is also an opportunity for—for——"

"Experiments," said Mrs. Noel Grey, "on a man—or men in general?"

"I should fancy you had used it to that end after listening to——"

"Oh, Lutie, for shame! You know it was untrue—every word of it. What's the good of an oath? The witnesses never even kissed the greasy old Testament at all, and what they gabbled over—do you call *that* sacred?"

"No—rather the reverse. But to return to our starting point. Do you mean to marry D'Arcy?"

"I marry him! Marry that man with the worst reputation in London! You must be mad to suggest it!"

"Then what are you to do? You allowed him to get you into this scrape."

"That was pure accident. But I don't mean to let him get me out of it in—in *that* way. I'll never speak to him again as long as I live."

Lucretia Gabwell folded up the darned table-cloth, and unfolded another.

"I can take care of myself," asserted Mrs. Noel Grey.

"Which means . . . ?"

"Well, I've always landed on my feet somehow. Haven't I?"

Lucretia assented. That was a way Mrs.

Noel Grey had. The lady in question seemed suddenly inspired by reminiscences. Miss Gabwell listened in silence.

Mrs. Noel Grey was always entertaining, and her recitals had the benefit of a vivid imagination. She was the most delightfully untruthful woman imaginable. She simply could not help it. The difficulty of telling a story twice in the same manner is always an appreciable difficulty to the feminine mind. To Mrs. Noel Grey it was simply insurmountable. She had never been able to conquer it. Now she had ceased to make the attempt.

Her voluble tongue and her picturesque embroidering of facts made her conversation delightful to people who preferred being entertained to being instructed, and were not sufficiently acquainted with Mrs. Noel's eccentricities to compare facts with fancies. To Lucretia Gabwell, however, these variations on an original theme had ceased to be amusing. She knew the facts—no one better—and the fancies were of no importance now.

She had known Mrs. Noel Grey from her school days. Indeed, she had been junior English governess when the lovely wild Irish girl had entered the prim, well-conducted establishment of the Misses Pettigrew, and

had set everyone by the ears and been in more scrapes and escapades than any girl before or since her advent. In spite of her tricks and insubordination everyone adored her, and Lucretia Gabwell no less than others.

The changes and chances of passing years had left them friends still, though Lucretia was bordering on the debatable ground of old maidenhood, and Mrs. Noel Grey had married and become the victim of that Law which seems made exclusively for jealous husbands and misunderstood wives!

Lucretia Gabwell had deserted the halls of Minerva, and on the strength of a legacy left by a distant relative she had established a select boarding-house. It was the present house of refuge of Mrs. Noel Grey.

She was only known by that name in the establishment. Lucretia Gabwell had suggested a *nom de théâtre* while the *Daily Telegraph* and *Times* were in request, and her friend was delighted with the idea and at once searched her diary for a suitable title. She kept a list of names always on hand for emergencies. Some were culled from churchyard tablets and some from books. At present she had selected a compound one from her stock

and passed as Mrs. Noel Grey, a widow from South America.

Fortunately her sumptuous under-linen was only initialled, and Nina Garbett stood for both letters. Her cards she had destroyed when the case had gone against her. Experience is a wonderful teacher, even to people who are not by nature cautious.

Want of breath at last compelled Mrs. Noel Grey to gasp "Finis" to a three-volume novel of escapades and ingenuity. She announced then for the hundred and second time that she was at her wit's end and must do something.

"Try the *Morning Post*," suggested her friend. "You might get a hint from the advertisements."

"Ah!—so I might." She made an impulsive dash for the journal. "What shall I look for, Lutie? Governess—companion—lady help? What sort of thing is a Lady Help? . . um . . um . . good musician—governess in a small family. Salary £20. Gracious, and I used to give my cook £35! I won't be a governess, Lutie! Housekeeper to elderly gentleman—widower—£50. Photo requested—unexceptional references on both sides. Would that do, Lutie?"

Miss Gabwell opined that it might be risky. Elderly widowers were sometimes——. Well, Nina knew the world better than she did.

Nina supplied the missing adjective, and plunged forthwith into an *apropos* anecdote which had a sensational climax of £500 damages paid to muzzle the dogs of scandal.

"Do you think I could get £500 out of an elderly Don Juan?" she asked laughing. "If so—I'd run attendant risks."

"It's scarcely a subject for jests," said Lucretia, with an attempt at bygone primness redolent of backboards and Minerva House.

"Perhaps not. I'll return to the 'friends in need.' Housekeeper—lady clerk—companion. Why—" with an exclamation of joy, "the very thing, I do declare, Lutie. Listen—isn't it *made* for me? 'Companion wanted for invalid lady in the country. Must be a good musician and elocutionist—able to read well. Preference given to widow accustomed to good society. Would be treated as one of the family. Salary £100 a year. Unexceptional references.'"

"Well, why don't you say something?" exclaimed Mrs. Noel, after a moment's interval.

Lucretia coughed dryly. "What about the —references?" she asked.

"Oh, that's easily managed. You'll do for

one at all events—the *personal* one. The written one can be faked up as before."

"I don't quite understand," said Lucretia, laying down her work. "I am scarcely in the position of an 'unexceptional reference.' The owner of a second-rate boarding-house in Gower Street! and I warned you last time about letters. They are very risky."

"Risky," mocked Mrs. Noel Grey, with her rich full-toned laugh. "Sure, that's just what makes life! I don't care a brass farthing for risk. Now, I'll tell you my idea. You shall be a lady with whom I have lived before, but you're breaking up your establishment—in—let me see—where shall it be?—Wales—Ireland—Scotland? Scotland, I think, and you shall stay at the Langham and see the lady or her representative."

Lucretia gasped. All previous experiences of her friend paled before this new audacity.

"What!" she said.

"You must have a good sounding name," continued Mrs. Noel Grey, ignoring interjections. "I can select one from my note-book. Have I a Scotch list, I wonder?"

She dashed across the room, opened a drawer and produced a small leather-covered pocket-

book before Miss Gabwell had fully digested her previous announcement.

"Mackenzie—that's very national—and safe," she rattled on. "It would sound better hyphenated with something. Let us try a few others. Donald—Bruce—Alan? No, that's too genuine. Shetland—ah, that's good. It has a nice, *woolly*, old-womanish sound. Mrs. Shetland Mackenzie! My dear, you're made for the name. Your husband was Scotch—you needn't bother about accent. Now for local colour——"

"I should be sorry to have your imagination, Nina," interposed Lucretia Gabwell.

"Well, you never could, so you needn't grieve in advance. It's part of my inheritance, I suppose. The Irish do lie so admirably! But where's a map, Lutie? I must look up Glens and Lochs."

"I haven't a dress fit for the Langham," said Miss Gabwell irrelevantly.

"Oh, Scotch women never dress well. But I'll fix you up in my black silk—we're nearly the same height you know! Black silk and a brooch of Scotch pebbles, and there you are. Have you got any Scotch pebbles? I once had a Cairngorm brooch, but I don't know what's become of it. I'll look it up."

"Oh Nina, if only you'd not let your tongue run on like an express train. You settle everything before one has even had time to think!"

"That's my energy, you see. The secret of success—not that mine's been much to boast of as yet. But I foresee great things. A new start may be the turning point, eh, Mrs. Shetland? . . . I think you ought to have a *front* to complete the part. Old Scotch ladies always wear fronts—dark brown with a band of velvet——"

"If you think I'm going to make a sight of myself to please you," exclaimed Lucretia, goaded into speech by the vivid portraiture so ably sketched.

"A sight! Certainly not. You'll only look an unexceptional dowdy, respectable Scotch person. I mean Scotch by marriage. But if you would throw in an occasional 'verra weel,' or 'dinna ye ken,' or bring in that saying about 'a but and a ben' (Heaven knows what it means!) it would be very appropriate. Could you manage it?"

"Nina Garbett, for goodness' sake try and be sensible for once. This is no joke."

"I never said it was. I'm most serious. I *mean* to get this situation. It's just the very

thing. I escape from town, and scandal, and all the rest of the bother. I sink my identity and rise like the Phœnix from my own ashes. Mixed metaphors don't matter to you, dear. And who knows—the elderly invalid lady may have a son—she must be rich or she couldn't pay £100 a year for a companion. What on earth do people want companions for? I'd give £100 a year to be *without* one sooner than with one. Where's the best 'cream-laid,' Lutie? Oh, dash it!—your address is on it. No matter—it looks respectable. Here goes the answer? My handwriting is my strong point. That's one service old Pettigrew did me; and my music—that'll do. Shall I write humbly or the reverse? . . . The reverse I think. Now give me five minutes and it's done."

A silent bar.

"Listen, Lutie. Will this do?" enquired the writer.

"DEAR MADAM,

"In answer to your advertisement in the *Morning Post* of this date I beg to offer my services. Misfortune has reduced me to comparative poverty—but I can truthfully answer to every requirement you have demanded. I

once held an unexceptional position in Society, but, as I said before, misfortune has overtaken me and I am compelled to do something for a livelihood. The personal reference I can give you is that of a lady with whom I have been living in Scotland. She has decided upon going abroad to join her son, and this has necessitated the breaking up of her establishment 'Craig Guthrie' in the Highlands. This lady is in town this week and you can see her at the Langham Hotel, Portland Place. If you desire other references I shall be happy to supply them, but I think that of Mrs. Shetland Mackenzie will be quite satisfactory.

"Awaiting your reply with every hope that it may be favourable,

"Believe me, dear Madam,

"Yours faithfully,

"NINA NOEL GREY.

"P.S. I omitted to state that I am a widow. I have no family."

"Humph!" said Lucretia Gabwell scornfully. "You'll never hear any more of it, I'm sure."

"I bet I will. Here—let's toss up. Heads, I win—lend me that half-crown I saw you put in your pocket—one—two—and away. Heads

it is! Hurrah, Lutie! I believe in luck. . . . Where's my bonnet? I'm off to post this at once!"

"I'll trouble you for my half-crown," said Lucretia, trying to stop a whirlwind of skirts that rushed past her. "It's all the change I possess."

"What! give back my luck?" screamed Mrs. Noel. "No, no, dear! You don't know an Irish woman."

Lucretia groaned. "I wish with all my soul I didn't!" she said, as the door closed.

CHAPTER II.

THE MIRROR TO NATURE.

Mrs. Noel Grey was the fortunate possessor of a temperament that was essentially reckless. She absolutely never thought of or cared for consequences, and saw most things through the rainbow haze of her own chameleon-like moods. Daring in thought, act, and speech, the marvel was that she had escaped moral shipwreck. When very young she had had a mad and foolish love affair, which she had conducted on the principles of "the world well lost." To be damned by society and the world at large, and to lose one's own soul in the whirlpool of passion, had presented itself to her as a picturesque and wholly delightful sensation.

A year later she had changed her mind, and her lover.

The venture of marriage had been another episode and also another disaster, but the cork-like buoyancy of her nature had brought her to the surface even after that disaster had

landed her in the Divorce Court. It was to her only a misfortune, showing that ill-luck is not applicable to cards alone. A law of attraction runs through evil. Hence the fatality which attends murders and other crimes. They tempt repetition and so end in retributive justice. Mrs. Noel Grey had been the victim of a *decree nisi* by some such law of attraction. She had affirmed her innocence and lamented with tears the hard and brutal nature of man, which will look at the worst side of one's actions and put a vile construction on mere "friskiness."

She confessed to the friskiness but resented the construction to which it lent itself to a court and council of unimpeachable integrity. She tried her best to explain the erratic principles on which Irish morals may be grafted, but the explanation was not favourably received, and a Judge who had no acquaintance with the subtleties of skirt-dancing professed to be shocked at a photograph of the defendant in very scanty garments and displaying unexceptionable ankles. It represented her in fancy dress at a ball in "gay Paris," but its production in court did not materially assist her case.

British justice would be quite unmoved by

the charms of Phryne in this strictly moral nineteenth century.

Mrs. Noel Grey posed as a victim and felt like one during the time she was occupying the attention of the Court, and focussing the eye-glasses of the barristers. But when the result of tears and Peter Robinson's model Parisian Mourning had only been the horrible edict already stated, indignation had fired her eyes and lent her fresh energy for the battle of life.

It was one curious trait of Mrs. Noel Grey's character that whatever part she assumed she played it as seriously as if the acting were real. Indeed she *was* the character to all intents and purposes, *for the time*.

At present she almost believed herself to be the widow of the divorced Garbett, and her feelings respecting the proposed companionship were so genuine that she would have been astonished had anyone made the suggestion of fraud.

The scenic part of the play was already disposed in her mind. She saw the private sitting-room in the Langham, the dignity of black silk and Cairngorms, her own imposing entrance, her demeanour mournful but composed, as one who has known sorrow and bowed to the stern discipline of many trials.

The interview could not but be satisfactory. She had the magnetic attraction of the Hibernian nature, and was irresistible to men and women alike when she made up her mind to be so.

If only Lucretia could be trusted! Poor Lucretia, with all the disadvantages of jaded spinsterhood and the wear and tear of a boarding-house life; with her careworn brow and dull eyes, and nervous restless fingers!

She had always been good to Lucretia, had helped her with money when she had had it, had recommended boarders, and been lavish in the matter of cast-off dresses.

"Lutie" was such a good soul, though trying. She was also a very safe confidante. It would have gone hard with Mrs. Noel Grey at more than one critical juncture of her life had she not possessed a trustworthy friend. Mayfair and Bloomsbury are not very far apart, looking at the map of London, but they seem as successfully to divide people from the world that knows or does *not* know them, as India or South Africa could do.

Mrs. Noel Grey had dropped like a wounded bird into one district, or flitted like a summer butterfly into the other at various times of her life. It said much for her that she could play

both parts with almost equal equanimity. Each held amusements and excitements in some shape or form. Life to her was a series of kaleidoscopic changes. Some of the patterns were ugly and *bizarre*, some enchanting, but all had colour and variety. The very restlessness of her temperament lent something vivid and exciting to surroundings that other people deemed common-place. Nothing was ever common-place to Mrs. Noel Grey. She found omnibuses and trains quite as amusing as the box seat of a four-in-hand, or the landau of a Countess.

She had experienced the advantages of both.

On the whole the landau was less moral than the omnibus, and the box seat had been shared with a society beauty who had afterwards gone on the stage and ruined two or three titles, and an infinitude of Guardsmen.

"Some day I'll write my reminiscences," said Mrs. Noel Grey to herself, as she was returning to Gower Street after posting her missive. "They'll shock a good many people, and frighten as many more. But they'll be instructive reading for Mrs. Grundy."

She had a righteous horror of that lady. She knew her to be quite incapable of under-

standing Irish vagaries, and fond of giving disagreeable names to quite innocent actions. Whenever Mrs. Noel Grey had been brought face to face with that representative female she had longed to tear the cap off her head, or shake out her false teeth, or stamp on her ugly, flat-heeled boots, or tell her in plain words how hideous she was and how narrow-minded.

As yet, however, these inclinations had been kept under restraint. But those kindred souls who knew Mrs. Noel Grey trembled. They said it was only a case of Time and the Hour. Then,—earthquakes wouldn't be in it.

Mrs. Noel Grey possessed unexceptional conversational gifts. Words flowed from her in a mellifluous stream and with no disadvantage of halting-places. Gesture and expression aided her in effects. Without being positively beautiful, her face possessed the great charm of expression. It was vivid and full of colour. Large flashing eyes that glowed and sparkled and were of a curious tawny brown with very long up-curled lashes, held men's gaze enthralled, and defied criticism. Her skin was of that clear creamy hue that makes blushing delightful, and mocks at the aid of bismuth or carmine. The scarlet of her lips was lovely

by contrast, and spoke of vitality and excellent health. So did her tall, supple figure, her thick, warm-hued hair that was neither red, nor gold, nor brown, but yet seemed a happy combination of all. But perhaps Mrs. Noel Grey's strong point was that her beauty stood any test. She looked equally well in winter or summer, whether walking or riding. The roughest wind only sent her rich locks into curls and tendrils of delicious untidiness, her thick, creamy skin never roughened, her nose never got red, and any style of hat, bonnet, or gown seemed to suit her.

It was essentially a useful sort of beauty. Made for wear and tear and impervious to alterations of climate or ravages of grief.

Women envied her when they saw her wash her face or disdain curling-tongs. Some were ill-natured enough to hint at preparations that were warranted to stand one ablution a day, but even these never attempted sea-bathing in her company.

To Lucretia Gabwell she had always seemed the loveliest woman in the world. She had for her that simple adoring worship which one feminine soul will sometimes feel for another that dominates it.

There was no doubt about Mrs. Noel Grey's

dominating Lucretia. She had always done so from her school-days and would continue to do it till the end of Time. The plain, elderly spinster marvelled at her, and was completely under her sway. She would watch her graceful gestures, listen to her melodious voice, her flow of words, her dramatic recital of her commonplace occurrences, her changeful facial expression, and wonder how the sex which united them in a common bond of womanhood could yet vary the form and detail of that womanhood in such a remarkable degree.

She had done many things in the course of this friendship that were not exactly creditable, but her conscience was not troubled on that account.

She had knocked about the world too long, and experienced too many vicissitudes to be either scrupulous or critical. The battle-field of life presented itself to her as a very rough-and-tumble sort of place in which you were quite entitled to give blow for blow, or aid yourself by stratagem if force was of no avail.

At thirty-five years of age she had become somewhat soured and disheartened, but her affection for the bright, genial, reckless Irish friend was the one bright spot in her experience.

Even now she was willing to lend herself to this last daring scheme, despite its risk.

When Mrs. Noel Grey returned from posting her letter she found Lucretia quite ready to listen to the plan of campaign. Then the black silk was produced and the spare form framed in its soft thick folds, the faded fair hair deftly arranged, and a successful transformation effected by aid of lace and ribbons to make her look mature enough to have a son abroad.

Mrs. Noel Grey seated her on a chair and made her rehearse her part.

"Do try and keep your hands still!" she exclaimed at last. "You fidget the whole time. Here, you'd better have your knitting. Gracious!——"

"What's the matter now?" exclaimed Lucretia nervously.

Mrs. Noel Grey pointed significantly to the third finger of her left hand. "Your wedding ring!" she cried tragically. "I couldn't lend you mine as I must have one also. What's to be done?"

"Buy one," suggested Lutie.

"Impossible! It would look too new, and not *thin* enough."

"Couldn't we try at the Balls?" suggested Lucretia. "They have all sorts there."

"We must, I suppose. We ought to get an old one for five shillings. We'll go to-night. You've got your thick veil still, I hope?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the last time?" and Mrs. Noel Grey went off into sudden soft laughter, "and the clergyman in the next box, and how he jumped when I said, 'Oh Jack! What will your wife say?' and the way he dodged us through the back streets."

"Yes; a nice fright you gave me over that. I was sure he had tracked us here and that he would think we were——"

"And the way you turned round and said, "Sir, go away. We are respectable females. If you persist in this persecution I shall speak to a policeman!' Oh, Lutie, I thought you'd have been the death of me, your voice was so *wobbly*."

She laughed herself into breathlessness. Then catching sight of the cap, the black silk, and the perturbed expression of the wearer, the whole situation flashed before her in that light of the ludicrous which always appealed to her temperament. Her mirth became hysterical and Lucretia grew alarmed.

The sound of the luncheon bell, however, exercised a wholesome effect on her. She

composed herself, readjusted her friend's toilet to the usual shabby cashmere and black silk apron, and then hurriedly smoothing her own hair followed her down-stairs to the dingy dining-room.

CHAPTER III.

"SORTS AND CONDITIONS OF MEN."

Miss Gabwell sat at the head of the long dining-table and surveyed an amplitude of white cloth, a cruet-stand, some withered ferns, and a cold leg of mutton.

Her boarders at present consisted of an emancipated Hindoo youth studying at University College, an old young lady journalist, who spent most of her time at the British Museum, two medical students, a widow with a false front and a pension, and a retired naval officer. Mrs. Noel Grey always suspected that the fair Lucretia had designs on the naval gentleman. But he himself was not disposed to encourage such overtures. The widow lady was rather deaf and very short of temper. As for the medical students and the Hindoo, they were the victims of a hopeless passion for Mrs. Noel Grey, and schemed for seats in her vicinity with a perseverance and subtlety that was of much pecuniary benefit to the maid-of-all-work.

The Hindoo had managed to get the seat next her to-day, and greeted her arrival with that low salaam for which the Oriental is justly celebrated. The English language still possessed many difficulties for him, but love assisted him to triumph over them.

"Madame has found the day warm. I sigh for the cool breeze," he said plaintively.

"Ah! you miss the *punkah wallah*," said Mrs. Noel Grey genially. She had gathered a few words of common use in the Hindustani dialect and generally sprinkled them about her conversation with Mr. Abdul Khush-hai Beg, which was his appellation, though everyone called him Mr. Abdul.

"The punkah—it is good—it is excessively good—but I mean the hills. Madame does not know what that air is—so fine—so pure."

"Oh—I've heard about them. I know lots of—of *mem sahibs* home on sick-leave—husbands in government employ—eh, Mr. Abdul? India must be delightful—for ladies."

"That I might hope, that the honour might be graciously vouchsafed to me, an occasion for madame's introspection," burst forth Abdul with reckless eloquence. "Oh! to show her my land—its beauty—its treasures—its variegated charms—its temples and gods. Ah!"

"I shouldn't mind some of its treasures," said his companion, accepting cold mutton and helping herself to salad, made in true English fashion, minced lettuce afloat in a miniature lake of vinegar.

"They would be a world too poor to lay at madame's feet."

"All the same I'd have no objection to see them there," thought Mrs. Noel Grey, letting her imagination fly off to the glories of the East, the adoration of Rajahs, and the blissful vision of a well-filled jewel-case.

"Why didn't you curry this mutton, Lutie?" she asked suddenly.

"Mary Jane can't make one properly, and I hadn't time to do it myself," was the reply. Then in a lower tone, "Besides, curry is so wasteful. They eat twice as much, and Captain Sims likes cold mutton."

"The Indian Mutiny began in the year 1857," burst in the deaf widow suddenly, with a vindictive look at Mr. Abdul, whom she disliked excessively.

"Yes," said Mrs. Noel Grey smiling, "and there are mile stones on the Dover Road!"

The two students guffawed ecstatically, and one whispered to the other that she was "rippin' and no mistake."

"I was not there then," said the deaf lady. "But an aunt of mine had a parrot sent her and it used to say 'Kitmutgar' all day long. I suppose it is the Indian form of swearing."

"It is not swearing—not at all," said Abdul solemnly. "It is the name of the attendant, what you call waiter, to any lady and gentleman."

"And then he moulted and his tail dropped out," said the widow. "That was in '59. She had him two years. He was very fond of chilies."

"How long before you've completed your studies?" asked Mrs. Noel Grey of Abdul.

"One more year. It is the law I go for, but being truth-speaking I find it hard."

"I expect so," said Mrs. Noel in a choked voice. "But if you weren't truth-speaking you might find it easier."

Abdul considered the point and partook of rice pudding.

"It is strange all your customs and sportings," he resumed. "You play crickets and tennis in the hot weather. Why not keep cool? It is very mad."

The students took up the cudgels for their country and its eccentricities, and the dispute waxed warm. Mrs. Noel Grey leant back in

her chair and listened amusedly. The argument became general and the deaf lady fired off occasional shots at the target of confusion, thereby increasing the discomfiture of the Hindoo gentleman.

Lucretia Gabwell listened to them all with the stolid indifference born of many experiences of boarders. When they talked they ate less, so she raised no objection to disputes on principle.

However, when the youngest medical student called the Hindoo a 'd—d nigger' she deemed it time to interfere.

"Mr. Derryman, I must beg you to moderate your language," she said severely. "Mr. Abdul is my guest, like yourself, and whatever his creed or complexion, I extend to him the same courtesy and hospitality as to the other members of this establishment."

"I will say no more now," cried Abdul, rising and making a courteous salaam to his fair enslaver. "The noble lady will judge I am not to blame. I have not the full organization of the English language yet. I make my excuse. When the English lords and ladies come to my land we do not mock at their ignorance of our ways."

"No, because you'd get jolly well paid out for it if you did!" said Mr. Derryman, who

was pugnacious by nature, and a victim to the refining influences of Hospital life.

"I have the honour to bid madame the good day," continued Abdul suavely, "though the hours will seem long till I can take my seats beside her once again. As for you, sirs" —he looked severely at the two young Sawbones—"you have insulted my country and my person. I beg you be more precautious or there will be assaults and damages, and a great avengement. I am of the race of Khushhai and therefore my honour is their regard. So be careful lest there be proceedings."

He left the room and there was a general movement, while Lucretia's eyes fell anxiously on the "remnants" with a glance suggestive of side-dishes and *réchauffés*. Then they all disappeared with the exception of Mrs. Noel Grey and herself.

"How you do set everyone by the ears, Nina!" she exclaimed angrily. "They used to agree well enough before you came."

"It is—it is my fatal beauty," laughed Mrs. Noel with a glance at the over-mantel on the chimney-piece. "Shall I help you collect the crumbs, Lutie? They'll come in for fish or cutlets, I suppose."

Lucretia Gabwell's sallow face flushed

angrily. "You may mock as you please, Nina," she said. "But pray the day won't come when you'll have to consider the value of every sixpence. There is no sin in economy. There is in extravagance."

"Well, I never could be economical, so I don't intend to try. If I had a place like this I'd set it going in the very best style. Fashionable neighbourhood, men servants, late dinners, weekly assemblies in the drawing-room. That's what people like, not this humdrum shabby-genteel business. I declare, Lutie, if I fail in this new venture I'll go into partnership with you and set up a new style of boarding-house altogether. I'll be bound it'll never be empty!"

"Of men—I daresay," said Lucretia grimly. "But the place would be under police supervision before long."

"You're a cold-blooded creature," exclaimed Mrs. Noel Grey. "I only see evil when I wish to see it, but you suspect it when it's only playing hide-and-seek with cultured Frailty. I trust to my instincts, but you trust to possibilities explained, and do not know the meaning of 'extenuating circumstances.'"

"No—and I do not believe in them either," was the uncompromising retort.

"That shows you are small-minded. Now, I'm above all such littleness. Nature made me on a bounteous scale and I'm obliged to her for it. Certainly I've had—episodes," she laughed softly. "But then life without the sparkle of excitement is as flat as uncorked champagne. I revel in sensations! They're the wings that lift life from the chariot wheels of Boredom and send it flying through space! I often think I'll go on the stage. There must be endless excitement to be got out of that."

"I wonder you haven't tried it. Acting should present no difficulties to you."

"That sounds a little spiteful, dear. But I'm forgiving, you know; I couldn't help being charming, even to your Oriental. A man once told me I was as good as a pick-me-up. I took it as a great compliment. Did you ever look upon me as stimulating, Lutie?"

"Stimulants are not the best things to go through life upon."

"You wise old Minerva, of course not. But he wasn't going through life with me. He was only one of my—episodes."

"I'd advise you to drop them now," said Lucretia severely. "You've certainly got into your worst fix at last."

"How do you know? Degrees of compari-

son may stretch on to an unlimited extent. Besides my 'fix,' as you call it, is not so very awful. It will all be over in six months, and I'll give myself decent burial meantime."

"Oh, I've no doubt you'll make a fool of yourself again and try a second husband."

Mrs. Noel Grey laughed. "I don't know," she said. "I fancy not. You see I've no illusions about marriage any longer. It only means giving a man who has hitherto been your slave, the privilege of being as objectionable as he pleases."

Her face changed suddenly, her lips set themselves in a hard line despite their rosy curves. "When I think," she said in a low quivering voice, "of the brutal things that Garbett has said to me, I could—*kill* him!"

"I wouldn't think of them then," said her friend with wise admonishment. "Try to save the little amount of conscience you have."

"My conscience only concerns myself," she answered. "It certainly doesn't object to my hating an enemy."

"Or—murdering one?"

"There are many ways of doing that, besides the dagger or the pistol."

"You make me shiver, Nina, when you talk

in that cold-blooded way. It's not like you even in your worst moods."

She laughed again. "No—I believe I'd only be impetuous in my desire for vengeance. It would never be a premeditated thing. But when 'my Irish is up,' as I used to say at school, I wouldn't stick at much, would I, Lutie? How I used to shock you, you poor dear!"

"I think you keep the art still," said Lucretia dryly.

CHAPTER IV.

SUCCESS!

SUSPENSE might have been trying to Mrs. Noel Grey but for a fine taste in millinery which led to much overhauling of her wardrobe and that employment called "alterations," so dear to the feminine heart.

In the art of dressing Mrs. Noel Grey had few rivals. The knowledge how to fix a bow or adjust a knot of ribbon has often proved more advantageous to a woman than mathematics. In "effects" she was especially good, having a natural talent for colouring and combinations. With regard to the actual work itself, her stitching and hemming and buttonholing left room for improvement.

"I really don't see what you want such elaborate evening dresses for," grumbled Lucretia half enviously, as she sat in her friend's bedroom one night and watched the transformation produced by new draping, or flower trimming, on a very lovely gown of daffodil

coloured silk, which dated its birth from Russell & Allen's and bore their unmistakeable stamp of *chic*.

"One never knows," said Mrs. Noel Grey. "If the house is good style I must dress for dinner."

"That dress is more fit for a duchess than a companion—and you forget you're a widow."

"Oh, but I've parted with my weeds long ago!" said the vivacious Irishwoman. "Of course, I'll wear them at first. Have you seen my black tulle—accordion pleats over silk—and iridescent sequins? The *dernier cri*, I assure you. Wait, and I'll slip into it. I wore it for a dinner gown. It looks so beautifully simple . . . It cost twenty guineas—and isn't paid for yet."

While she spoke she had whirled off one gown and whirled on another, and now stood folding a soft thick sash round her waist while the dusky draperies floated like a dark cloud round her tall *svelte* figure.

"There!" she cried triumphantly. "It only wants a bunch of roses, or a spray of *hibiscus*, to complete it. Would you like to see me dance in it? It's as light as gossamer."

"I'd like to see you sensible," said Lucretia Gabwell sternly.

"What's that—a knock? Postman I do believe."

Mrs. Noel Grey looked over the stairs. Mary Jane was ascending them slowly and attempting to decipher an address on the envelope she held with a corner of her apron. She had never learnt to associate "waiters" with the delivery of letters or cards, in spite of manifold instructions.

"Is it for me?" asked Mrs. Noel Grey impatiently.

Mary Jane stared open-mouthed at a splendid vision in black transparencies, and then subsiding into a grin of admiration handed the missive. Mrs. Noel Grey flew back and closed the door.

"Post-mark Coombe Abbot," she cried faintly. "Oh, Lutie, it's come! Here—open it, I feel quite faint."

She sank down on the nearest chair and watched her friend who was scarcely less excited than herself.

"Well—what is it—yes or no? Good God! You're a hundred years taking it in!"

"Oh, Nina, it's *yes*—if the interview is favourable; and her—husband—is it?—yes, husband and his sister Lady—Lady something—are to meet your reference at the Langham to-morrow the 15th . . at 12 o'clock."

"Great Scott!—what short notice! You'll have to go there to-night, Lutie, do you hear? You *must* be on the spot. Don't look so dazed. I'll go with you and settle everything—you must take my dress trunk, because it doesn't look well to arrive without luggage. Here, wake up, *do!* What's the matter?"

"I don't like it, Nina—I do not indeed. It's not fair to make me do this. You see you're taking the place on false pretences."

"I'm not. I'm taking it on my own merits, and because I'm driven to it. Don't be so squeamish, Lutie—you've done worse things than this for me. Think of D'Arcy's supper party and helping to hoodwink Garbett. Now do not be silly. This is nothing. You've only to remember you're Mrs. Shetland Mackenzie of—what is the place—oh, Craig-Guthrie. That I've been with you for two years. Before that I was in South America, where my husband died. As for my accomplishments and all that you can answer safely, and I'll be at hand to climax everything."

"We've forgotten the wedding-ring after all," gasped Lucretia.

A naughty word escaped Mrs. Noel Grey. "You must wear mittens. I've heaps! Come now—dress and pull yourself together. Send

Mary Jane for a bottle of 'three star' and some soda and you'll be all right."

"What am I to do by myself all night at that hotel?" groaned Lucretia, rising and allowing herself to be gowned in the black silk which had been altered to her figure.

Mrs. Noel Grey paused a moment and considered.

"I don't see why I shouldn't stop there too. They'll be none the wiser. Yes, I'd better. You'll be doing something stupid if I'm not at your elbow. I'll spend the night in coaching you."

Miss Gabwell's face did not give the impression that the prospect was one of unmixed joy, but she could no more control the storm of Mrs. Noel Grey's impetuosity than a straw can withstand a whirlpool. She was not really scrupulous. She feared the results of the conspiracy—that was all. However, it was scarcely possible to retract now and leave her friend in the lurch.

The chances were in her favour. If they secured this situation it meant temporary safety, and in all probability future advantages over which she would have a claim. Before her toilet and packing were complete she was quite composed, and the brandy and soda

which Mrs. Noel Grey administered still further quickened her energies and steadied her nerves.

There still remained the difficulty of explaining to her boarders that she had been hastily summoned to the sick-bed of a near relation and might be away till the following day. Mrs. Noel Grey proposed doing this for her, and had dashed into the drawing-room, made the announcement and labelled the dress trunk, while Mary Jane was fetching a cab, and her mistress calculating the slices of bread and spoonfuls of tea necessary for the next morning's breakfast.

By this time it was ten o'clock.

Another five minutes was spent in locking drawers and boxes for fear of prying eyes. Then Mrs. Noel Grey put her last twenty pounds and the "three stars" into her dressing bag, her quietest bonnet on her head, and they left Gower Street and were driven to the more aristocratic region of Portland Place.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Shetland Mackenzie sat in a small private sitting-room of the Langham Hotel busily occupied with knitting, and glancing from the note-book on her knee to the clock

on the mantel-piece with eyes that looked strained and anxious.

To all appearance she was a middle-aged lady of irreproachable demeanour and attire. In the bedroom adjoining stood Mrs. Noel Grey, dressed in black and very pale. Not that she was nervous, only strung up to a pitch of excitement such as a race horse might experience at sight of his compeers before the start.

It was but three minutes after the appointed hour when the door was opened and the names of "Lady Slee" and "Mr. Oldreeve" announced.

The anxious listener soon found that all was going smoothly. Mr. Oldreeve had lived all his life in the country. His sister was the wife of an engineer who had been knighted for some important work. She asked very few questions and then requested to know if the lady herself could be seen.

Mrs. Shetland Mackenzie stated that she was expecting her to call that very morning, and this being the case, Mrs. Noel Grey slipped out of the bedroom and entered the sitting-room by another door.

Mr. Oldreeve started when he saw her. Lady Slee surveyed her critically, and mentally

summed her up as far too handsome for the post. But no possible objection could be raised in presence of a veritable duchess so far as manners, breeding, and knowledge of society went. Mr. Oldreeve was a handsome, florid man of about forty-five years of age, and with more knowledge of horses and dogs than of women. It seemed to him that this fair and gracious and accomplished being was doing him and his wife an inestimable favour in accepting such a position. He felt ashamed of his sister's persistent questioning, and when the announcement that Mrs. Oldreeve was passionately fond of music brought a simple proposal to play to them, followed by a dreamy delicious nocturne of Chopin's and then a waltz, he was utterly subjugated. He felt he had offered far too small a salary and pondered secretly on presents that might be an equivalent for additional terms.

Meanwhile Mrs. Noel Grey was in her element. The scene was "going" beautifully, and she felt she was making a good impression. She was far too keen-sighted not to detect the warm light of admiration kindling in the man's absorbed eyes, but she knew the woman was the one with whom she had to deal and—sorely against the grain—she ignored the

more attractive bait, and set herself to win the favour of a severe critic.

Lady Slee asked a great many questions, but Mrs. Noel Grey proved a second Œdipus to her sphinx-like capacity for "posers" and came out triumphant from the ordeal.

Finally Mr. Oldreeve took up his parable and declared himself perfectly satisfied on his wife's behalf and proposed to seal the bargain on the spot. When could Mrs. Grey come down to them?

That lady after brief meditation proposed the following Monday. This was Thursday.

Mr. Oldreeve then wrote out her trains, changes and details of the journey—promised the carriage should meet her at Coombe Abbot station, and rose to terminate the interview.

As the door closed the two confederates looked at each other. Lucretia Gabwell's face was very pale. She gave a gasp and the knitting dropped unheeded on the floor.

"Aren't you afraid?" she said in a stifled voice.

"Afraid? What on earth of? It's gone off splendidly. Nothing could be better."

She drew herself up and then walked across the room. Lucretia's eyes followed the figure

in its dusky draperies and easy seductive grace. How easy life seemed to be for a woman who was beautiful!

"It was disgracefully simple," continued Mrs. Noel Grey, pausing before the looking-glass. "I needn't have been nervous. I thought you'd have spoilt everything—once," and she flashed round on her friend, "when you stammered so over your son's profession. I wonder how it is there's always one weak point in one's armour. I believed I had prepared for everything and then *that* cropped up. However, it's all right. Now to settle up here, and then *hey presto*, Exit—Mrs. Shetland Mackenzie!"

She rang the bell and asked for the bill, which she scrutinized anxiously.

"You may thank me for a good ten shillings saved in brandies and sodas," she remarked, as the waiter disappeared with a £5 note on a salver. "Now mind, the cab is to be directed Victoria Station and go there. I'll leave the box in the cloak room and call for it another time. We can't run the risk of being tracked, and with all due respect to Lady Slee she's a *cat!* I distrust her and she does not like me!"

CHAPTER V.

THROUGH THE POST.

From Mrs. Noel Grey to Lucretia Gabwell.

HILLSIDE,
COOMBE ABBOT,
SOUTH DEVON, July 3rd.

"DEAR LUTIE,

"All's well that ends well, and here I am safe and sound and quite at home. I've waited three days in order to give you some information respecting my situation, as the slaveys call it. To begin with, the journey was awful. Hot—dusty—tiresome, and the changes were so arranged that as one train came in, it saw the other going out, and waits extending from three-quarters of an hour to an hour were a common occurrence. However, I arrived at Hillside in due time, and very charming it is. Mrs. Oldreeve is somewhat trying, but *he* is delightful. She is one of those nervous, morbid-minded persons who make life a misery for all their friends. I have a suspicion that

morphia or—something else—is her real complaint, but I can't be sure yet. They seem very well off and have no children. Everything is in excellent style and I have a charming room, furnished as bed and sitting-room. The view is magnificent. If I get any influence over Mrs. O. I'm all right. But I'm not *sure* of my ground yet. She must have been pretty, but is now dependent on 'make up' and a French maid—a hateful creature who seems to have her mistress wholly in her power! She'll have to be bribed or ousted out of position, I foresee.

"Mrs. O. was inclined to be suspicious at first. Ah, Lutie! women can forgive *anything* in their sex but good looks, and when beauty and misfortunes go hand-in-hand there's always jealousy and spite to face them! But I'm not going to inflict you with moral axioms. Far from it. I'll go back to Jasper Oldreeve. Horrid name, Jasper—I always associate it with poison and murder and horrors. I do not know why, but I do. He is one of those trustful, good-tempered, easily-got-round men who are made for women to tyrannize over, or to fool. His wife has done the first for twelve years of married life. I wonder if it remains for your humble servant to do the last. If

only he were not rich! But he is—and I want money, above all things. What's the saying about 'the fool and his wealth'?—Mark the application, Lutie, my dear. The man is in a fair way to fall in love with me—and a *weak* man in love is more difficult to manage than a strong man. And the wife is jealous. Here's the beginning of a drama for you. Can you supply the parts after this outline of plot? However, most good prospects have their ugly spot, and I must make the best of him!

"I'll write again soon when I've felt my ground.

"Yours ever,

"NINA."

From Lucretia Gabwell to Mrs. Noel Grey.

131, GOWER ST.
LONDON.

"Oh Nina! Nina! For Heaven's sake be careful. Remember you're not out of the fire yet. You *know* you can't afford a scandal so soon after your case. Why not content yourself with making friends with the wife, and leaving the husband alone? What do you expect—what have you to gain? Only fresh trouble and worry. The reckless way you

go on frightens me. I can't always save you from the results of your own imprudence. You never listen to advice, but for once be guided by common sense. Do what you were engaged to do. Be a companion and nothing more. Believe me, in six months' time you'll thank me for the warning. You're superstitious. Well, I've had a horrible dream about you. I can't get it out of my head. Only let me pray of you, for your own sake and mine, be careful.

"Yours ever,

"LUCRETIA."

Mrs. Noel Grey to Lucretia Gabwell.

July 12th.

"You old goose! What is the use of cackling about nothing? As for your dreams—I wonder how many times I've heard them and been asked to regard them in the light of a warning! Do you suppose I can't take care of myself, and do you fancy *for a moment* that I'm a sentimental fool ready to be caught in the trap of a man's weakness! My dear, if I've nothing else to thank life for, I thank it for *experience*. You say I'm reckless. Well, so I am. But I know when to give myself a free rein and when to put on the curb. Now,

as I'm in a communicative mood, I'll give you the history of Hillside up to date. So prepare to be shocked till further notice.

. . . . . .

"Mrs. Oldreeve seems to have taken quite a fancy to me. I play to her by the hour —write her letters, and have completed the conquest by doing her hair (precious little there is left of it) in a new and becoming style which makes her look ten years younger. I think she is older than the good Jasper. I call him *good* because she is always sounding his praises.

"There never was such a husband—so devoted—so generous—so constant! It's an odd thing, Lutie, but I never yet knew a 'good husband' who wasn't bad—on the sly—or who didn't break out in some way at last. I watch Mr. Jasper more keenly now and I note he has weaknesses—not very creditable ones—though excusable. But more of that anon. I'm going to give you a description of a dinner-party here and a sketch of Coombe Abbot Society.

"I was informed by Mrs. Oldreeve that she expected me to be present. So I prepared the 'black and sequins,' and took care that shoes, gloves, etc., were irreproachable. Englishwomen are proverbially careless about details,

but I haven't lived in Paris for nothing! On the eventful evening I went to my lady's chamber to enquire for her and report myself. I found her—well, decidedly *queer*—and in an atmosphere of eau de cologne and toilet vinegar, not to mention something stronger and French. My old suspicions awoke. It is *morphia* I am sure. I and the maid did all we could, but she was in a state of collapse, and it was impossible she could appear. Mr. Jasper came in at last, much worried and put out. I put the best face on things and suggested an excuse for her on the plea of 'temporary indisposition.' She might be able to appear in the drawing-room later on. He followed me out of the room and entreated me to *help receive the guests!* I was astonished. I attempted excuses. My position, etc. He would hear nothing. Took my hand—was tenderly persuasive in the 'Teach me, Mary, how to woo thee' style, and being dressed I thought it a pity to be obdurate. Besides, I was curious to inspect Coombe Abbot society. So I walked into the drawing-room, which *en parenthèse* I had pulled into shape considerably, and which with palms and flowers and shaded lamps really looked delightful. (D'Arcy had artistic tastes—there's no doubt about it—and I've

always been an apt pupil.) On the stroke of seven they began to arrive. First, Sir Thomas and Lady Wargrave of the Hall (the magnates of Coombe Abbot), then Dr. and Mrs. Buckleigh-Doone (leading medical practitioner), Mr., Mrs., and Miss Morton-Beere (rich—plain—stupid), Mr. Septimus Babberley (young—soft—High Church), Miss Babberley (prim — stuck-up — ultra-religious), Mr. and Mrs. Enderleigh (fox-hunting—jolly—and rolling in money), Jack Enderleigh (only son—*delightful*), Mrs. and Miss Clackbury (the greatest scandal-mongers in the place), Rev. Merton-Crawford and his wife (aristocratic—pompous—bland—and self-important), and two elderly gentlemen who seemed to have no specialty beyond devotion to the table.

"Into this assemblage sweeps your insignificant Nina with the composure of a duchess and the confidence born of a faultless *toilette*.

"How the women sniffed and how the men *looked!*

"'Mrs. Noel Grey—a friend of my wife's . . .' So spoke Mr. Jasper, red of face and flushed of manner.

"Cold bows acknowledged the introduction. The women surveyed me with that 'I should like to see your certificates' air, which is so

purely 'county,' and serves to convey the wide difference between an assured and an ambiguous position.

"I took their measures rapidly and with the assurance that comes of much 'knocking about.' I liked the look of young Enderleigh but I was handed over to the Curate. He took me in to dinner, but I noted I was well in ear-shot of 'mine host.'

"Oh, Lutie—these appalling English dinners! So stiff—so formal—so dismal! To me they are truly a weariness of the flesh and a scourging of the spirit! Babberley crossed himself before sipping his soup. He was a little sallow-faced man, with eyes that never met yours, and a coarse mouth and a sanctimonious smile—of such is the kingdom of Ritualists. I dashed into conversation—asked him about services, and rang the changes on Matins and Compline and Celebrations. He expanded—as a flower to sunshine—and before the dessert came on I could see he regarded me as one of that crowd of yearning womanhood to whom a spiritual spouse promises more bliss than an earthly one.

"He talked like an ascetic, but not a *true* ascetic, of the mystical consolations of religion. But I could plainly see that for him religion

meant only a certain number of forms and ceremonies, gorgeous vestments, and an incessant laudation of the priesthood. He begged me to go to early service as a lover entreats for a *rendezvous*. I gave a conditional assent with drooped eyelids and a hint of 'duties.' He appeared to understand, and our conversation drifted to the manifold sorrows of life and its troublesome obligations. I did a little embroidery to the skirts of my past history, and he told me with a sigh of sympathy that I had indeed been 'chastened.' I quite agreed with him.

"(*Entre nous*, Lutie, I can hardly recognize that past myself, now. It has undergone so many changes.)

"I noticed one thing. In spite of his religious mania and ultra ritualistic tendencies, the vicar himself never took any notice of his curate. I hear they are at daggers drawn. How characteristic of Christianity!

"Well, the dinner ended at last. The women looked hot and greasy, and most noses were red. But nature has been kind to me. Besides, I *never dine in tight corsets!* . . In the drawing-room we found Mrs. Oldreeve. She had recovered but was (to an experienced eye) decidedly queer still. I was asked to play.

It was preferable to talking to those deadly dull dowagers, or prim Miss Babs, so I gave them Chopin and Grieg which they didn't understand, and sang 'Then you'll remember me' which they did, (and I expect *will*.)

"The men came in at the end and were enraptured. Babs hinted at my 'delightful organ' being used in the services of the Church. I made up for the slow first half of the evening by a rattling flirtation for the second. I'm sure Miss Babs was savage. I believe I had *accaparéd* her man, but I was too desperate to care. He gave me the *carte du pays* of the county. It was great fun. I drew myself up at last, remembering Mrs. Jasper. But she was in an owl-like condition by now, and paying no attention to anyone.

"Lady Wargrave was rather rude to me. Perhaps Mrs. Oldreeve had let out I was only the 'companion.' How terribly afraid Englishwomen seem of losing their dignity by showing even ordinary politeness to anyone holding an inferior position. I wonder if they expect to be labelled in Heaven! There's no doubt Irish people do understand good manners and will take as much trouble to be charming to a governess as to a duchess—a fisherman as to a Lord Mayor! . . . I must say, however, the

Enderleighs were very nice, and gave me quite a warm invitation to come over there with or without Mrs. Jasper. Of course I was one of the Boynes of Dunboyne, one of the best Irish families, and they understood 'pecuniary losses' in a liberal manner, and pitied my misfortunes. Well, enough of 'Squireens' and squiresses. I must close these interesting records. How are all friends at Gower Street? Do you still have to dose Abdul and the Sawbones with Dr. Watts, or do they keep the peace now I've taken my departure? Don't write me any more lectures and for goodness' sake give up your Joseph tendency for dreams.

"Yours,

"NINA."

CHAPTER VI.

FEMININE SPARRING.

From Lucretia Gabwell to Mrs. Noel Grey.

LONDON.

"DEAREST NINA.

"I'm *awfully* hard up. Most of the boarders have left—the rent is due, and the 'gas' has called for the last time. Can you send me £20? Borrow it from the *good* Jasper—or one of your admirers. I *must* have some help.

"Your troubled and wretched,

"LUCRETIA."

Mrs. Noel Grey to Lucretia Gabwell.

"Can only manage a fiver. Try the *family plate*. Jack Enderleigh is madly in love with me.

"Yours in haste,

"NINA."

From Lucretia Gabwell to Mrs. Noel Grey.

"Your letter is heartless and five pounds was very little use. It barely saved the gas.

But of course you're up to your ears in another silly flirtation and won't trouble your feather head about anything else. *I know you*, Nina, and I must say a more selfish person it has never been my lot to meet. Look how I've helped you again and again, and what thanks do I get! The moment I've set you on your feet I'm forgotten—or shoved aside until you need me again. You owe me £20 and I *must* have it. Surely you can forestall your salary or manage it somehow. If I wasn't quite desperate I wouldn't ask you.

"Yours,

"LUCRETIA."

Mrs. Noel Grey to Lucretia Gabwell.

"You old nuisance! I *can't*—and that's all about it. For Heaven's sake don't worry me or I'll do something desperate. I'm up to my ears in worry and vexation. Mrs. Oldreeve is very ill—not expected to live. What chance for me as No. 2? Eh?

"NINA."

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT THE DIARY SAYS.

COOMBE ABBOT, July 28th.

"I'VE always said I wouldn't keep another diary since the production in Court of that celebrated one which lost me my case. But as I never kept a resolution yet, it's not very surprising that I'm breaking this among hundreds of others.

"Besides, it's necessary now for me to keep notes of my life and surroundings, for many reasons—and habit is a hard taskmaster so I'm back again at my old employment.

"How deadly dull the country is! I'm sure it's answerable for many sins, in spite of what poets say about Nature and Innocence. Here am I driving a three-in-hand coach (of men) and embarked in a desperate flirtation with *two*, and all out of the dulness and want of occupation that seem inseparable from fields and 'Songsters of the Grove.'

"Let me classify my victims for my own satisfaction. Jasper Oldreeve, dangerous—

Jack Enderleigh, fascinating—and Babs—poor, soft, silly Babs—sublimized spooniness! Nature surely made a mistake about Babs. He ought to have been a woman—one of those women to whom religion is as exciting as dram-drinking. He has invited me to a service of his own, next Sunday evening. I think I shall go, in spite of Miss Babs' sour looks and unresponsive aspect.

Sunday night.

"Of all manias with which poor mortality is afflicted, surely religious mania is at once the saddest and most hopeless.

"The self-important, self-conscious bigotry of Babs is almost ludicrous when I reflect upon it. To see the poor little fool to-day stoled and vestmented and coquetting with the rubric was a sight to make angels weep, supposing that any celestial being would trouble its head (or spirit) about such nonsense as his service. He conducted it on a novel plan of his own, which served to adjust the balance between what a congregation might endure, and a priest (save the mark) might venture.

"The Church of St. Aloysius is small and lavishly fitted up in the improved ritualistic fashion. Stained glass windows showed the

usual impossible figures in the usual impossible attitudes, and appealed to my sense of artistic fitness as they generally do. Soft lights—incense—full-toned organ chants—flowers—vestments—all these 'means to an end' delighted the senses of a congregation (largely feminine) and announced the importance of the officiating zealot.

"It was some Saint's Eve—or Festival—and as the Vicar was absent, Babs had the whole service to himself. He seemed in an ecstatic frame of responsibility all the time, and his little figure looked absolutely gorgeous in a magnificent pontiff-like garment of crimson and gold that flowed around him and swept off such minor articles as choir-books and anthem parts in his passage to and fro.

"When he ascended the pulpit, I confess to a feeling of curiosity as to how he would preach. But he merely read out a discourse which, even to my seasoned ears, savoured somewhat of indelicacy. It was on the subject of Spiritual Love, and he held forth on it with the fervour of a sensualist, and the hypocrisy of a priest. The mysteries of Marriage as an ordinance were also discussed with a glow and fervour only possible to a novice. It was plain to me that poor Babs had not the faintest idea

of what matrimony really meant. If he had known it as I know it——

"When he described it as an indissoluble contract which no man has either power or right to dissolve, I could have laughed in his face. I who sat there listening—victim of a *decree nisi* not yet two months old! Certain branches of the Law and certain dignitaries also, would fare badly in the matter of emoluments if Babs' doctrines became universal! I scarcely fancy they will, however, in these enlightened days, when the chivalry of Degraded Man is only equalled by the audacity of Modern Woman.

Monday.

"Little enough to chronicle in the way of events. Coombe Abbot doesn't seem very lively. The only subject for my pen to descant upon is the 'good' Jasper. I imitate his wife's phrase. She always calls him that. In all my flirtations hitherto I have carefully avoided married men. The double *esclandre* would be too much, even for me, and I don't stick at trifles. But against my better judgment—almost against my will—this man draws me on.

"He has formed for me one of those blind infatuated attachments that sometimes men of middle age do form, to their cost. I say that

advisedly. His eyes have that *greedy* insatiable look in them which always means danger. When he speaks to me his colour comes and goes like a girl's. He stammers and is confused. His hand trembles and his eye sinks. He avoids speaking of his wife, or else openly hints at her state of health rendering her a merely nominal helpmate whose loss would not grieve him very deeply.

"Danger lurks in every hour of our growing intimacy, for Mrs. Oldreeve is frantically jealous and the servants are all *her* spies—particularly the French maid.

"However, risk always appeals to my dare-devil temperament, and I cannot help enjoying the situation.

"Now I come to the third and last of my admirers, Jack Enderleigh. What can I say of him? Oh! to be young, *free* and *pastless*. I've coined the word for the occasion. At seventeen how I could have loved him! Bah—love again! Haven't I had enough of it—seen enough of the mischief it works, the madness it sows—the misery it leaves as its only lasting gift? Haven't I played fast and loose with life and honour often enough? . . .

"But with Jack I forget all. I am—almost—what he thinks me. His boyish adoring

heart is at my mercy. He believes in me so thoroughly, poor boy—for boy he is in comparison with me, though four-and-twenty and thirty are not so far removed in actual years. But I've some conscience left, I suppose, for I do try to warn him off and will never listen to any attempt at love-making from his lips. . . . He is one of the very, very few men I've ever felt I should care to kiss. Women like myself are horribly fastidious. Men never think so—but we are. I shudder at the 'good Jasper's' touch—I simply loathe Babs' tepid hand-grasp and pale smile and the simmering adoration in his small ferret eyes—but Jack!

"Good Heavens! What folly is this. And I'm not even free to think of any man—supposing that I was idiot enough to let myself do so after this last scandal. What *would* Lutie say! Well, as we've quarrelled for the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time in our lives, I'm not likely to confide in her. Besides she hasn't an ounce of sentiment in her whole nature. The 'world well lost for love' and—Jack—wouldn't appeal to her except as a first class recommendation for a lunatic asylum."

CHAPTER VIII.

QUICKSANDS.

August 4th.

"If my worthy employer persist in her morphic tendencies she will assuredly kill herself.

"How one wonders at the deliberate madness with which men and women at times give way to vices which they know tend to certain death!

"This woman makes me shudder when I look at her.

"She frightened us all last night and I've not had an hour's rest. I wonder how she gets the stuff? Rosalie must have some hand in it, I feel sure. To see her under its influence is an awful sight. Worse than if she drank, and I've seen women bad enough at *that!*

"Sometimes she is all amiability to me—at others a perfect fiend. Her insinuations become most insulting, but I bear them with the resignation of—necessity. I cannot afford to be thin-skinned at present. If I could——

. . . . . .

"The good Jasper appreciates my martyrdom and is all sympathy. He is also lavish in the matter of dry champagne. (The gods are kind to me still.)

"Babs hints that my trials may win me the 'Victor's Crown,' and Jack Enderleigh's eyes tell me that he would make up for all I suffer did I but relax my guard. Two months of the six are almost over. If I were free once more——

"No! No! . . . No more matrimonial nooses for me. Good God! How I ought to *hate* men!

August 5th.

"Poor old Lutie! She's still sulking. Now I never bear malice—long. I can even at times forgive my enemies though I've never *quite* brought myself up to the point of 'praying for those who despitefully use me.' Has any mortal being ever dissected the impossibilities of the Church Catechism? Query for Babs. . . . But as I was saying, Lutie still sulks and I'm driven to confide in my diary from sheer necessity of talking to someone or something.

"As I was roaming about the grounds this morning I met Jasper Oldreeve, of course by accident—at least on my part.

"'You look pale and worried,' he said tenderly. 'Have you anything on your mind?' (I thought 'If he knew the burden of a *cause célèbre*'—) but I only smiled sadly and said, some troublesome creditor had been worrying me for a bill and could not be brought to understand he must wait for three months till I received my salary. 'And I have such a horror of debt,' I added piteously.

"He looked at me. His lips trembled. His eyes were bloodshot. (What on earth is there in a woman to make a man feel like that!)

"'Let me help you,' he entreated. 'It would be a privilege, an honour; indeed it would. Place me as your creditor instead of this shopkeeper. I can promise'—(with an ardent glance)—'that I won't be a hard one.'

"'Oh, won't you, if you have the chance,' I thought. Needless to say I did not express myself to that effect. One is trained to make language conceal thought as well as express it.

"I fluttered about the subject like an uncertain bird, now resting on the twig, now flying off a short distance hesitating, trembling.

"'It is so much,' I said, 'Fifty pounds—half my salary.'

"'Is that all!' he exclaimed gleefully. 'I'll go in and write you a cheque at once.'

"I called myself a fool for not making it a hundred, but then, one never knows whether a strange fish will bite or evade the bait.

"He entered the house and I sauntered on wondering what on earth had possessed me to ask for money. I only wanted to send poor old Lutie her ten pounds and I would have forty for myself which—at present—I did not need. And I had put myself under an obligation to this man. One of my foolish impulses again.

"He came back with a cheque for £50 payable to bearer, and I was obliged to let him kiss my hand as a reward for his generosity.

"If wives only knew how their lords and masters go on behind their backs! Well—I could tell a pretty few stories about married men did I choose. However, Mr. Jasper and I roamed about for another half-hour, the main facts of the interview being his repeated injunctions to me to look upon him as a friend and apply to him in any trouble or dilemma. Of course I agreed. Just as if I had not repeatedly proved the worth and meaning of a man's friendship—for a pretty woman.

"When I returned to the house I was informed Mrs. Oldreeve had been asking for

me. I went at once to her boudoir and found her in a specially disagreeable frame of mind. I also had the pleasure of writing an invitation to Lady Slee—at her dictation—asking her on a visit for two months. I shall have to mind my P's and Q's when that worthy lady is on the ground. So will Mr. Jasper. Mrs. O. seems suddenly to have pulled herself up and is trying to keep from the morphia. She looks awful. Not all the 'make-up' in the world can hide the ravages of time and her sad failing. The quivering eyelids, the dim eye, the dull-hued skin, the trembling hand—what a tale they tell! No wonder her husband's shuddering glance turns from her to me in grateful wonder.

"He is but a man!

. . . . . .

August 8th.

"Lady Slee is coming on Monday.

"There is some great local function to be held on the next afternoon—a Flower Show to which the *élite* of Coombe Abbot will flock. It is held annually in the grounds of some rich *parvenus*, who rejoice in the aristocratic name of Smith.

"As Coombe Abbot is essentially a county of hyphenated names, they call themselves the

Major-Smiths—out of compliment to prevailing fashion. They are comparatively ancestorless, but a large amount of shares in Smith's Pottery Works has an eloquent meaning for the neighbourhood, and accounts for mansion, carriages, and fortune—to everyone's satisfaction.

"The Wargraves' place is not so fine or half so imposing, but then they are not interested in Drain Pipes and Glaze, and have only been common landed proprietors for a couple of centuries.

"I hear they conscientiously snub the Major-Smiths and never patronize their entertainments. There are two Miss Major-Smiths—one fair and plump, one dark and lanky. As yet they have not shown any marked individuality, being constantly shadowed by 'Mamma,' who quite carries out *her* military title by the discipline she maintains in her own household.

"But these are all *on dits*. I shall draw my own conclusions when I have seen them.

"Babs is to grace the festivity—so is Jack Enderleigh.

. . . . . .

"I have a vision of *foulard* and a Paris bonnet as I await the day."

CHAPTER IX.

SOCIAL AND SOCIABLE.

Lucretia Gabwell to Mrs. Noel Grey.

August 7th.

"DEAREST AND KINDEST NINA,

"Forgive your poor old friend and remember only that she really was at her wit's end what to do for money and beset on all sides by cares and worries. A thousand thanks for your help. I felt sure you would not desert me! Your letter was very short. I only gather from it that you are still very comfortable at Coombe Abbot and—as usual—have a court of admirers round you. I never knew such a woman. The men seem as if they *couldn't* help falling in love with you. Oh, my dear, it's all very well to talk of beauty being only skin-deep, but it strikes me men don't ask for anything *deeper!*

"Talking of skins I've something to tell you. I've a new boarder: such a queer woman. At first I couldn't make her out at all, but now I've discovered she keeps a toilet repository for ladies *and gentlemen.* I've got into her con-

fidence, and oh, my dear, the things she tells me! And the men are just as vain and silly as the women, with their rouge and hair-dyes and moustache darkeners and the Lord only knows what. You should see the letters she gets! . . .

"Do you know I've a great mind to go into partnership with her. It would pay much better than boarders. The only thing is I'm not very good-looking. She wants a woman, who'll advertise her washes and stuffs by a *natural* complexion. Aren't they frauds? And yet she makes hundreds out of the business. I couldn't help thinking how well you would have suited her with your beautiful skin and hair and *figure* —(she even has *Bust* Lotions, my dear—and she says if I only saw the skinny old hags that come to her for 'improvers' I'd have fits!) What do you say to my joining her? I've the good will and fixtures here to dispose of, and I might raise a little money somehow. She only wants £200 put into the concern. Don't think I'm hinting, dearest Nina. I'm not, indeed. Your £20 has helped me out of my present difficulty.

"The young Hindoo Abdul has come back to me. I wonder if he'd be good for a loan? Oh, why haven't I your persuasive powers,

Nina? Well, enough for the present. Tell me all about your garden-party, and *pray be careful of the married men!*

"Yours ever,

"LUTIE."

Mrs. Noel Grey to Lucretia Gabwell.

August 9th.

"DEAR OLD GOOSE!

"Stick to your business and don't go experimenting in complexions and hair-dyes—and wicked old men trying to ape youth and vigour. Haven't I always told you they're every bit as bad as women? I'd like to know your new boarder. She must have some funny experiences to relate. However, you can get them for me and I'll take them second-hand—or third to be more correct.

"That hateful old cat, Lady Slee, is here—and I cannot call my soul my own now—she's always putting Mrs. Oldreeve on my track and keeping me up to what she calls 'my duties.' Duties be d—d. Well, I'm in a rage and I'd love to say something wicked—even on paper . . .

"This place evidently agrees with me, I'm looking ten years younger, and have such a colour, better than all your Toilet friend's

rouge or washes. I've been reflecting on what you said. The truth is I'm getting sick of this life. I can't stand being lectured and ordered about, and the Slee woman is an abomination. Besides, between us and the post, my dear, *I'm getting a bit frightened of the good Jasper!* You know me, and you know I wouldn't say that if I didn't mean even *more* than the words. When he looks at me with that red glare in his eyes I feel positively *sick*. There is something about him that I've never seen in any man before, even in the desperate stages. Love makes brutes of some men, and angels of others. It is not hard to classify the good Jasper!

"Oh! the misery of being a woman—sometimes! I'm tired and heart-sick to-night, Lutie; my one feeling is to get away from this place before—before anything happens! I don't know *what* I expect to happen—I don't know even why I fancy anything should happen—but a horrid foreboding is upon me. Once before I felt it. It was before D'Arcy——. Good Heavens! what am I writing in this morbid strain for? I must be overtired after the Flower Show this afternoon. I'll finish my letter to-morrow and give you a description of the Major-Smiths.

"May the Powers that Be send me sleep, or I don't know what will become of me!

. . . . . .

"August 10th. I woke this morning after six hours of deep dreamless sleep, feeling a new creature and as if I hadn't a care in the world.

"As it still wants half-an-hour to breakfast-time I will fill up the remaining pages of my letter with a description of the Major-Smiths' Flower Show.

"There were flags and banners and occasional blasts of music from the Coombe Abbot Yeomanry band. There was a big tent filled with plants, peaches, and potatoes, labelled 1st Prize—or 3d Prize as the case might be, and a small tent with ginger beer and lemonade bottles and dry, stubbly-looking buns by way of refreshment. On the grass promenaded the guests. If their position was equal to their number they must have been very select. I counted thirty women and three men, one of whom was the everlasting cleric, without whose presence no country function seems complete. The Major-Smiths are not popular I was told, at least Mrs. Major isn't. She is terribly afraid of what she calls 'lowering her dignity.' So she is rude on principle to everyone who

is not as well off as herself. The best people all snub her, so the poor soul has only this form of retaliation left. She quite ignored me though papa Major looked somewhat as if he would not have objected to an introduction. I overheard her say once, 'Oh, that's only the companion of that dreadful Mrs. Oldreeve. I don't know why she came here at all . . . and so over-dressed!'

"I chuckled. Did I not know that she was dying of envy at the cut and style of my gown —and that everyone in the place wondered how anything so simple as *foulard* could yet be so *chic?* Mrs. Major-Smith completed her illustration of good manners by inviting some dozen people into the house for tea, leaving the others to the ginger-beer tent, or to nothing at all! When I tell you she had *three* footmen to serve the tea and carry the bread-and-butter and cake on Sheffield salvers, I have said all that is necessary. While this ceremony was going on Babs arrived, and, needless to say, made straight for me. Being the fourth man there he was much ogled and entreated, but I wouldn't let him go. *My* hour had come. Presently I saw our host bearing down upon us, from the lawn. He had been sent by the gorgon to invite Babs in to tea. A pressure

of my hand on his arm stayed his first words of acceptance.

"'*I* prefer to stay out here,' I remarked, and I'm sure you wouldn't desert me, Mr. Babberley.'

"'Mrs.—er—Noel Grey,' stammered Babs, introducing me.

"I bowed. Papa Major grew red and apologetic. 'Would I honour them also?'

"I declined. I didn't care for tea, I said.

"A pause followed. Poor Papa fidgeted and grew more nervous. 'And—er—Mr. Babberley?' he stammered.

"'Thanks—no—not this afternoon,' said Babs, intoningly. 'Another time . . . the pleasure—ah—er——'

"Papa Major shuffled off. I laughed softly. 'What odd people!' I said. 'They ought to take lessons in manners.'

"Babs hinted blushingly that it wasn't everybody who had—'ah—er——'

"I shook my head protestingly. 'It's an Irish inheritance,' I said. 'We have something to be thankful for, you see.'

"'Much,' he said, clerically. 'Much, dear lady. Your beauty, your wit, your charm—alas! how subtly sweetly dangerous, and yet how—ah—er——'

"'Exactly,' I said. 'You express it beautifully. Here are Mrs. Oldreeve and Lady Slee. I wonder if they have had enough of this. I have.'

"They had had enough of it. We turned our backs on Sheffield plate and footmen without further delay.

. . . . . .

"Life here seems a perpetual conundrum to which I'm always asking 'Why?' and giving it up.

"All country towns have peculiarities. Coombe Abbot is not an exception. It has two conspicuous virtues. They are cliqueishness and 'scandal.' Society moves in sets, in small sets—but scandal does not. It is universal. It is the breath of life to all persons who are not too poor to indulge in it—the poor of course who have their pleasures measured out to them by local boards, and district visitors.

"The paucity of men in the place leads one to speculate on the unattractiveness of women. The married men are rarely seen with their wives—the unmarried are rarely seen at all. The High Church party won't know the Low Church, and the poor Roman Catholics of the place are comparatively ostracized. Religion

is always remarkable for its bountiful prejudices. So I observed to Babs, and he quite agreed with me.

. . . . . .

"Yesterday we had a visitor in the shape of the doctor's wife. She is a lady of artistic tastes which are exemplified by a yellow drawing-room and an elaborate complexion that always looks best in a subdued light. Her conversation consisted of details respecting her neighbours' actions and modes of life. The details might have been more charitable, they were certainly—amusing. I felt the interesting fictions of the Peerage had a formidable rival in the Coombe Abbot pedigrees.

"A hint of mine at the 'School for Scandal' being the most suitable revival for some forthcoming Private Theatricals seemed to offend this lady. She cut short her visit with some display of temper.

"Among the 'Sets' is one mainly composed of women—in very good positions too—who are renowned for a weakness for—well, not to put too fine a point on it—'Soda—with something—'. If the 'something' occasionally counteracts the good effects of the soda, that is a mere incident—remarkable, of course, but of frequent occurrence. A leading light conde-

scends to air her particular weakness at the bar of the principal hotel. Well, my dear Lutie, we are only good and bad by comparison—but I think even in *our* worst day we drew the line at a—bar. If I live here long I shall begin to consider myself a woman of the last chapter of Proverbs type!

"I hear the breakfast bell. Good-bye for the present.

"Yours,

"NINA."

CHAPTER X.

A STORM BREWING.

Extracts from the Diary.

"AUGUST has taken her departure; September, her genial-tempered sister, is here again, breathing gentle hints of change. The whirr of firing and crack of guns speak eloquently of men's employment, and dinner parties are a common, instead of rare, occurrence. Hillside is quite full of visitors, but the *onus* of their entertainment falls on me, for Mrs. Oldreeve is again very ill. There are no women invited, for that reason. Jasper looks pale and anxious, and goes about the house in a nervous and preoccupied manner. There is a furtive look in his eyes that I don't like. They used to be so frank and open!

. . . . . .

"Babs has proposed! Yes—actually the High Church principles and their sworn servant have been offered for my acceptance, and I—only laughed at him!

"He was hurt and very much inclined to

be nasty at first, but I have smoothed him over. Jack Enderleigh is here very often. He is a first-rate shot . . . . Of late I have somewhat avoided him. I am afraid, he is more in earnest than any of them and I don't want to hurt *his* feelings. It would be unjust to lead him on, delightful as he is. I am becoming almost virtuous in my scruples, I—who thought I had neither heart nor conscience left! I wonder—Oh, dear! What a lot of temptations there are in the world for women!

. . . . . .

"The French maid came to me this morning after the sportsmen had left.

"'I like not the looks of Madame,' she said uneasily. 'She lies in so heavy a stupor we cannot arouse her. I should like that you pay her a visit and advise if to send for the doctor.'

"I rose rather reluctantly from the piano. I was just in the mood for Chopin. However, I went up to Madame's bedroom as desired. The blinds were drawn as usual. The lace curtains lined with rose-colour to suit the poor vain creature's complexion were partially drawn aside. She lay back on the pillow with closed eyes. Her face looked grey and drawn and she breathed heavily. I was alarmed. 'How

long has she been like this?' I exclaimed. 'You had better send at once for the doctor.'

"'I found her so when I entered the chamber,' exclaimed the maid. 'She didn't ring as of custom. I wait and wait and wait. . . . At last I enter through the little dressing-room which communicates with the chamber of Monsieur. I find her—*so*.'

"The expressive gesture said all. I looked at the table by the bedside. The night lamp had burnt itself out. Beside it stood a small bottle. I knew it well. I turned to the maid. 'Surely,' I said, 'you did not leave *that* beside her all night?'

"'*Mais, non—certainement;* I put it away and locked the medicine chest after I have given the drops.'

"Again I bent over the unconscious woman and touched her hand. The clenched fingers clasped something. I opened them with difficulty and found they held the little needle which is used for giving injections. A cry of horror escaped me. There was no need of words to explain. The story told itself with a significance only too terrible.

"We tried all ordinary methods to rouse her but our efforts were useless. The grey face grew more deathly, the rigid form more

rigid. Before the doctor came we knew it was hopeless, she was dead!

. . . . . .

"When I feel it is incumbent on me to faint I can always do so.

"I did it on this occasion, while messengers were being despatched in all directions for the good Jasper. Needless to say I did not see him. I heard he was greatly shocked and looked 'terrible white.' That was the way the servants expressed the newly-made widower's grief.

. . . . . .

"I suppose I shall have to leave here now or all the Grundys of the place will be up in arms. Oh dear! how unfortunate I am! . . .

"A long melancholy day has given place to a long melancholy evening. My spirits have sunk to zero. Mr. Jasper has been shut up in his library the whole day. No one has seen him. The men have all left. The house is as dismal as a churchyard and the quiet and gloom of it all is getting on my nerves.

"I have written to Lutie to tell her of the catastrophe and telegraphed to Lady Slee at Jasper's request. Old cat! I suppose she'll be down on us to-morrow, playing '*maitresse*

de la maison' to her heart's content and my discomfiture.

. . . . . .

"Midnight.

"An hour ago I was just thinking of retiring to rest. Now all thought of sleep or peace of mind is effectually banished. Good Heavens! Was there ever such ill-luck as mine! While the scene is fresh in my mind I'll commit it to paper.

"I had slipped into a dressing-gown and an easy chair and was engaged on Zola's '*La Curée*' for the third time of reading, when I heard a knock at the door. At my permission to enter there appeared M'mselle Rosalie, the French maid.

"She came in softly and with an air of mystery that I did not like. Her scintillating green eyes shone strangely in her white face. Her black hair was as neatly arranged, her figure as trimly corsetted as ever—and yet the woman looked different.

"'What is it, Rosalie?' I asked, putting down my book and surveying her with some surprise.

"'I have heard there will be more of this,' she answered, nodding her head in the direction of *that* room. 'Enquiry—official en-

quiry—what you call inquest on the body. I shall have to speak all then that is of my knowledge.'

"'An Inquest!'—I started up and looked at the woman in sudden horror. 'Who says so? . . . What's it for? I don't believe it! The doctor knew her habits for years . . . he knew she had died from an over-dose of morphia. What more is there to say?'

"She shrugged her shoulders. 'You English have strange customs,' she said. 'The Habeas Corpus—the Coroner's jury quest. I know not all what. The death is not natural, that is what they say. . . *Why did she poison herself?*'

"'By accident, I suppose,' I said.

"She shook her sleek black head. '*Mais non* . . . it was not an accident. She was mad—jealous—unhappy, she did it—of purpose.'

"I stared at the woman. 'Jealous . . of whom—what—how do you know?'

"'I know,' she answered, turning up her small eyes and nodding emphatically. 'It was of you and Monsieur Oldreeve!'

"Every drop of blood seemed to rush to my face in a torrent of indignation. I sprang to my feet. 'How *dare* you say such a thing!' I cried furiously. 'It is infamous, it is a lie! I will tell your master of your insolence.'

"'Tell him all what you please—and I—I shall tell the Coroner what I *know*—what Madame has said to me often times. How she hated you, how you and Monsieur were always together! How the neighbours wink ze eye and whisper—*ma foi*, yes! And you pretend to so grieve for Madame. You scream and faint when you see her lying dead. . . Ah you act it well—but I know—I see—it is not—not grief, it is not the real faint. Yes . . . tell my master. I care not. I lose my place—it is through you—I have never like you—I say always it is a bad day when you come here, making the mischief between Monsieur and Madame, and now look! Behold, you have done it—and I—I have no friends, no home! I am r-ruined!'

"She rolled her *r's* and flashed her eyes in a manner that made me shudder. She was the enraged *soubrette* of the French stage to the life in her jealous spite—her blind rage, her envy and vindictiveness.

"I sat down once more and tried to reason myself into coolness.

"'Rosalie,' I said impressively, 'why should we be enemies? I have never done anything to offend you that I'm aware of.' I slipped my hand into my pocket as I spoke and drew

out my purse. 'Look here,' I went on, producing a five-pound note. 'If you state what you have just told me at the inquest you will only make a scandal and do no good. It has nothing to do with the case. I never made any mischief between Mr. Oldreeve and his wife—*to my knowledge*—and I never dreamt that she was jealous of me. I swear it.'

"I handed the note to her in a friendly fashion. She took it, and for a moment her features seemed to relax. Her hand fastened on it greedily and the lids drooped over the spiteful green eyes. Then suddenly she changed again—crumpled the note into a ball and threw it contemptuously at my feet.

"'I desire not your bribes,' she said with affected contempt. 'It shall be said *nevare* that I, Rosalie Brunêt—took money to betray my poor dear mistress that is no more, from one whom she hate of all her heart. *Mon Dieu, non.* I say it shall not be.'

"'Very well,' I said coolly, 'my word is as good as yours. I shall say you raised this report because I would not give you hush-money. Your master at least will believe me!"

"'*My master!*' There is no power in the written words to express the meaning she put into them. Contempt, fury, baffled passion.

"A light burst upon me, a light born of some suspicion and some knowledge of the good Jasper's little ways. Had there been something between him and this woman? Was her hatred of me not without reason?

"I left the note where it had fallen and studied the woman attentively. She was not good-looking, but she possessed a fine figure and had a certain air of *diablerie* that might have been fascinating—to a man.

"'My master . .' she went on when she could find breath and language once more. 'Yes—a fine Master—*hein.* I could say some things—many things of Monsieur Oldreeve did I choose. You are well matched . . . he and you.'

"'You will oblige me by restraining your insolence,' I said, 'and by leaving my room. I have no wish to hear more.'

"'But I have more I choose to tell. Yes. It is not for nothing you come here. You have reason. You have the past. Eh . . Oh, yes, I know. I can see with both my eyes, I am not deceive. My Lady Slee she suspect you always, only that Monsieur he was a fool,—and you have the face to cheat men!—Monsieur Babberley and Monsieur Enderleigh, *par exemple.* You are a pretty fair lady, *n'est-ce pas?*'

"'Will you leave the room,' I said chokingly, 'or shall I ring and have you turned out?'

"'Turned out! . . . Ring the bell—many bells, in effect all the bells! What I care? I tell the whole house. It shall be common talk. I drive you away, even I . . . who am nobody now since you throw dust in his eyes. Fool . . . I say it again—fool!—and yet again—fool! fool! fool!'

"'My good woman,' I said coolly, 'if you think I'm going to listen to your abuse any longer you are vastly mistaken. Either you tell me rationally what was your reason for seeking this interview, or I shall summon your master here and acquaint him with all you have said.'

"And quick as thought I crossed the room, locked the door and put the key in my pocket. Then I took my stand by the bell-rope and waited.

"For a moment she measured me from top to toe with half-shut gleaming eyes. I expected her to spring at me, but apparently she thought better of a first feline intention, and so stood, her hands clenched, her foot in its neat shoe tapping impatiently on the floor.

"'I have said my say,' she hissed in a sibilant,

hoarse voice. 'The rest it shall be for the Coroner's jury-quest.'

"I laughed contemptuously. 'I think,' I said, 'you'll find you will be the fool then. What about your own doings with Mr. Oldreeve? Would you care to have them shown up? It looks more probable that *you* had an object in getting rid of your mistress than anyone else. Perhaps you thought Mr. Oldreeve might marry you if he were free?'

"It was an arrow at a venture, but she turned a sickly grey hue, though she tried to laugh it off. '*Mon Dieu*, it is a droll idea that —he marry me! My faith, no! but the idea is not bad.'

"'You have had it yourself and expected to realize it,' I went on. 'It will make a pretty story for the Coroner, and you will look—not quite so proud of yourself perhaps. Now have you any more to say?'

"More! Yes, she had much more, plenty more, in effect a volume, but she would not say it then—to-night. She would wait. She knew who would get the best of it. So with many shrugs and nods and a tigerish gleam of eyes and teeth, and a hissing warning to 'beware'; she hated me and she never forgave—she would prove who was strongest.

Then I unlocked the door and she went out with a parting glance eloquent of animosity.

"I sat down spent and trembling now the battle was over. The woman's threats had opened a pitfall before my feet. I could not afford another scandal—so soon.

"As soon as I had collected my senses and calmed down I wrote the account of this interview in my diary for my own edification. There is no disguising the fact that this creature's spite can place me in a very awkward position. The more I think of it the more troubled I become. Lady Slee, too, is no friend of mine, and will probably lend a willing ear to any stories against me. The fact of having Mr. Oldreeve on my side is no advantage when I have to deal with two spiteful women. I almost wish now I had tried to conciliate the French maid during the time I have been at Hillside. But then—a woman who looks on another woman as a rival cannot be won over. . . . Well, there's nothing for it but to face the matter boldly. I have had disagreeable tasks to perform before now. Let me trust my Irish pluck to come to the rescue—and win over even Mrs. Grundy and a Coroner's jury at the back of her."

CHAPTER XI.

THE STORM BURSTS.

"THE Coroner's Inquest was a more serious affair than I feared. That I came out of it decently is certainly due to my nationality alone. I won them over at once. I am constrained to say, however, that the good Jasper made an awful fool of himself.

"His agitation, the way he contradicted himself, the utter absence of anything like manly calmness and decision, made me feel inclined to shake him. That hateful French woman certainly *hinted* all she dared, but what with her broken English, the plain fact of her own culpable negligence, and the British juryman's invincible objection to foreigners, she did no harm to anyone but herself. As for me I had thought out every part and played it perfectly. I was faultlessly dressed in simple black. I was calm and composed, and I gave direct answers to every question and never made unnecessary statements. When the French maid lost her head and spluttered out venom with her foolish tongue, the jury simply

looked at me and—drew their own conclusions. However, my mind is made up. I must leave Coombe Abbot directly the funeral is over.

"The scandal of the affair will be common talk and when the tongues *here* begin to wag they do it to some purpose. I cannot risk remaining and facing it out even to win Jack Enderleigh. Win him!—what am I driving at? . . . I who am not free to think of any man—who risk exposure at every turn!

. . . . . .

"I have passed through a furnace of doubt and fear and anguish to-day. I am utterly broken down now. The verdict was of course 'Accidental Death.' Her habits were too well known for any other. If anyone came in for blame it was the French maid for leaving the medicine case in her way. I can see very plainly *now* that the whole business was open to grave suspicion, but she was so unpopular and Mr. Oldreeve so very much the reverse, that he won all sympathy and everything was done to spare him.

"And yet to my thinking there was something *wrong* about the man. Hard as was the ordeal he had to face, he might have faced it with more pluck and courage than he evinced.

Perhaps I watched him more keenly than others. Perhaps—to me—he was not quite the upright, honest-hearted individual his fellow-townsmen thought him.

"I had been behind the scenes and I knew—what I knew.

"I was so worried and upset that I sent to the housekeeper to let me have dinner in my own room, and begged the favour of a pint of champagne which duly appeared.

"The funeral will take place the day after to-morrow. Then I shall leave Coombe Abbot with certainly very little regret, though what I'm to do next Heaven knows!

. . . . . .

"A singular feeling of impending disaster has fastened upon me to-night. I cannot shake it off even with the aid of Pommery Sec!

"The presence of that woman, Rosalie, seems to haunt me in spite of locked doors. I feel as if those green eyes were watching me at every turn, that spiteful tongue hissing its slanders to every eager listener.

"She must have a very strong motive to hate me so. Am I right in suspecting that she looked on me as a rival? The thought is humiliating, but it alone gives any clue to her extraordinary conduct.

"I have another ordeal before me. I must see Lady Slee and tell her I intend to leave—and ask if I may use Hillside for reference in the future.

"The funeral is over. It was fixed for a very early hour and the attendance was very small. Lady Slee, myself and Rosalie were the only women present.

"On our return I asked Lady Slee the question as to reference. To my surprise she drew herself up in the most grundyfied manner and answered that *her* knowledge of my qualifications was not sufficient to incur such a responsibility.

"I could read between the lines, of course. I tried to command my temper and answer with indifference. I hope I succeeded. I shall have to make use of the 'good Jasper' instead. Lady Slee had the impertinence also to give me some 'good advice' as she called it. It consisted of a patronizing intimation that my position in a household was a somewhat delicate one, and demanded more circumspection than I had shown at Hillside. Of course the hint was given only in a 'friendly and Christian spirit.' Disagreeable hints always are—from woman.

"I answered that I was perfectly well able

to take care of my own manners, though it was difficult to forget one was a lady and had been accustomed to a very different sort of society to that of Coombe Abbot. This in 'cat' parlance put her back up. She was good enough to inform me that the society here was equal, if not superior to any that I might have mixed in, in London or abroad. I intimated that *her* opinion was not *my* experience, and that for vulgarity, narrow-mindedness, and ill-nature, I would back Coombe Abbot against any place of its size and importance in England.

"'I have heard more scandal in the last three months,' I said, 'than I would hear in as many years in town. The more religious you all profess to be, the less you exemplify any principle of Christianity.'

"Then there was much bridling. 'Dear me! Did I speak from experience? If so she would feel it quite her duty to inform Mr. Babberley of my opinions.'

"That was the finishing stroke.

"'Mr. Babberley knows them perfectly well,' I said brusquely. 'And knowing them has done me the honour to offer me his hand.'

"She almost *jumped.*

"'I . . . I can't believe it,' she gasped.

'He—of all people—and vowed to celibacy too. I fear your vanity has misled you.'

"'Not at all,' I said coolly. 'You have my full permission to ask him whether I did not refuse him.'

"'Refuse him!' she cried incredulously.

"'Yes. It is a case of neither "flesh, fowl, nor good red herring." A nondescript religious maniac is not quite the sort of husband I should choose.'

"She got crimson with rage and almost *flounced* out of the room. I retired to mine, finished some odds and ends of packing, then put on my bonnet and mantle and went out for a walk.

. . . . . .

Midnight.

"My last night here! Well, I'm not sorry though I could wish Mrs. Oldreeve had not been in quite such a hurry to 'shuffle off this mortal coil.' Another three months would have made all the difference to me.

"I may as well put down the last events that have happened and then close this brief record of my first essay at 'Companionship.'

"I closed my last entry with the determination to walk off my trials and temper—if possible. I took the quietest road, avoiding the

town of set purpose, and found myself at last close to the old Church of Coombe—an ivy-covered, tumble-down building of the old Norman style, which, as yet, I had only seen from a distance. The gate was merely latched. I opened it and found myself in the shady, peaceful old churchyard, among moss-covered headstones and long rank grass and dilapidated graves, their occupants long forgotten —their names almost undecipherable now.

"Tired and breathless with my rapid walk I sat down to rest. Soon my eyes began to wander to the slanting lines of gravestones around me. I have a liking for quaint epitaphs and uncommon names. I have always found country churchyards supply me with both. My note-book was in my pocket. I drew it out and jotted down a few of those within eyeshot of my resting-place.

"Here lies all that was mortal
Of Arabella Young
Who on the 25th of May
Began to hold her tongue.

"Poor Arabella! How hard they were on you. Were you such a very great talker, I wonder? Who composed this tribute to your conversational achievements? Friend or foe,

or some relative who loved you none too well, or maybe had suffered at your hands, or, rather, lips?

"My eyes wandered further:

"A young maaide here lies
Crossed in love
And tooken she to realms above
But he that crossed her I should say
Desarves to go t'other waay.

"Another close beside it announced of Martha Jane

"Across the wold
The wind did blow
Her ketched a cold
What laid her low.

"A philosophical Benedict had inscribed over his wife's grave that,

"Here lies my poor wife
Much lamented,
She's better off,
And I'm contented!

"A victim to the medical profession had evidently composed his own epitaph in a fit of spleen and burst forth into sarcastic denouncement of their abilities.

"If drugs could save
From dreary grave,
God wots enough
I took of stuff.

But doctors' skill,
Or draught and pill,
  Prolonged life's feast
  Not in the least,
And here I lies,
While still they tries
  On other folks
  Their silly jokes.

"Humility itself seemed to breathe in Enoch Cudmore's declaration,

"From nothing I came
  To nothing I've fled,
I can but be 'nothing'
  Now that I'm dead!

"I was slowly and thoughtfully transcribing these lines when I heard the soft rustle of a skirt behind me. I glanced round, and to my no small disgust perceived Rosalie, the French woman.

"She was dressed in deep black. The veil was thrown back from her bonnet and her white face and green eyes looked even more malevolent than usual. She stood on a sloping bank, rather above me, her figure showed to excellent advantage in her well-fitting dress, but that something *feline*, fierce, untamable about her which I have before spoken of, was more noticeable than ever.

"For a moment a touch of fear chilled my blood. I remembered how lonely this place was and wished I had not come so far. I said nothing, however, after that one rapid glance, but went on with my entries, and waited for her to announce herself.

"With the usual impulsiveness and impatience of her nation she did so.

"'Madame!'

"I looked up enquiringly, remarked, 'Well?' and made another entry.

"She left her position on the bank, descended slowly, every rustle of her gown sending little shivers of curious dread through my frame, and came and stood opposite—her arms folded across her chest, her lips so tightly drawn that they looked bloodless.

"'I have watched you,' she announced, 'I have given myself the pain to follow you. *Ma foi*, it is a *triste* place this, but it will serve. You think you have done with me, eh? That my threats meant nothing. That you leave here to-morrow and all is said and done. Ah, but you are droll! You reckon without your costs as your proverb says. I have not done with you yet. My faith, no! You shall hear.'

"I rose to my feet and looked at her. 'See here, my good woman,' I said, 'I have had

more than enough of your insolence and your absurd threats. If you persist in annoying me in this manner I shall just hand you over to the police. We shall soon see whether they won't put a stop to it!'

"'The police! Ah, that is good . . . that is excellent!'

"It was in fact so good and so excellent that M'mselle Rosalie actually laughed—the shrill mirthless laughter usually known in stage parlance as 'sardonic.'

"'You seem amused,' I observed as I closed the note-book and put it back in my pocket. 'But let me tell you this is no idle threat. No one is obliged to put up with slanderous threats in this country. There is redress at hand, as you may speedily find out for yourself.'

"I turned away, and gathered the skirt of my dress in one hand preparatory to crossing a patch of grass and weeds and nettles. Swift as thought she dropped her arms and stood before me, barring my way.

"'You shall *not* go . . you *shall* hear! Do you think I have forgot . . do you think because those foolish men make game to me that I speak not the language quite perfect, therefore I am beat of my purpose? I tell

you, no! I have sworn my r-re-venge. I shall have it. Rest assured of that. Eh, *mon Dieu!* Yes.'

"I lost patience then. 'What on earth do you mean?' I exclaimed. 'Revenge—what for? What have I ever done to you? You have taken some absurd notion into your head and are trying to injure me out of sheer malice.'

"'You are a fraud,' she went on coolly. 'You are a wicked woman. I know you . . I have seen you in London with Monsieur D'Arcy . . ask him if it is not true. He knows me—Rosalie Brunêt and he has fear of me. I know much. I have my eyes open. I could with ease what you call 'blow upon you'; let the light in on your little *histoires*. Ha! you turn pale, you look affraide. Have I not said true?'

"'It is an infamous lie!' I cried furiously. 'And I advise you not to attempt to repeat it, or you'll find yourself in a police court for libel. I leave here to-day and shall probably never see or hear more of any one in the place. Take my advice and keep your tongue in your mouth, or it will be worse for you. I'm not going to be slandered with impunity, as I have said before.'

"She laughed scoffingly.

"'Great words! Big words! *Poufe!*—so—I blow zem away. I have no fear of you or what you can do. I have you under my thumb. Ah, I could say much. . . Madame, my poor mistress, she get me to make the enquiries of you. Where is then your reference wid the funny name, eh?—gone—*Poufe!* She fly away like the thistle-down yonder. Ha! Ha! I have frighten you at last. It is for you to fear the law—not me.'

"I stood there silent and boiling with rage. My wits seemed to forsake me. I only saw the spiteful face, the grinning mouth, and recognized dumbly that I had an enemy, and a very formidable one in this creature.

"In desperation I tried to parley. 'What do you want?' I said. 'Why are you bent on annoying me? I've never done anything to you.'

"The moment I had said it I felt it was foolish. But perplexities were torturing me. She saw her opportunity and seized it.

"'I make a compact,' she said. 'You go away, you give no address. You do not write or see Monsieur Oldreeve *ever* again. Then—I for my part—swear to keep silence of my side.'

"I smiled contemptuously. 'As far as I'm concerned I never intend to see Mr. Oldreeve again. He is nothing to me.'

"'Then you promise?' she cried eagerly. 'Silence for silence. You slip away—you see him not again, and you leave no address?'

"'I shall certainly not "slip" away,' I answered indignantly. 'As if I were a thief or a criminal. I shall of course say farewell to Mr. Oldreeve and then go off to London as arranged. But I promise not to let him know where I am—if that will content you.'

"She surveyed me thoughtfully under lowered brows for a moment or two. I tingled all over at the covert insolence of the look. But I knew I was in a fix, and for once let discretion get the better of my Irish impulsiveness.

"I felt the degradation of submission most keenly, but if this creature knew any of my past '*historiettes*' it was better to compromise matters at once. I preferred to leave a 'clean bill of health' behind me at Coombe Abbot. I should like to think I had Jack Enderleigh to fall back upon at some future time.

"Suddenly she drew a small ivory crucifix from her bosom and held it out to me. 'Swear to me on *that*,' she cried dramatically.

"I bent my head, remembering that I too had been brought up in her faith, baptized into her Church.

"'I swear,' I said with faltering voice, and my lips touched the sacred symbol.

"She drew her black draperies together and swept slowly out of the churchyard."

CHAPTER XII.

AN INTERLUDE.

The Diary Continued.

"I BREATHED freely when the dark figure disappeared and I heard the fall of the rusty lock as the gate closed. Then I began to review the scene in my mind.

"I felt savage with myself for having been trapped into a compact with this creature. I wondered how much of my past career she really knew. The fact of her last mistress having employed her to spy on me was not an agreeable discovery. As for what she had said about D'Arcy, that did not surprise me. His experiences had been vast and his acquaintances numerous as the sand by the sea. He may have fallen across this creature at some time or other, and in all probability trusted her as—well, as he trusted most women.

"My reflections at this point were interrupted by a loud peal of thunder. I started and looked up at a darkening sky black with

clouds above the kindred darkness of cypress and yew trees.

"The afternoon had grown late without my noticing it—and now a storm was at hand. I have a horror of thunder, and the ominous look of the sky promised it lavishly even as a second and third peal crashed through the brooding stillness of the air.

"I hurried out of the churchyard. As I reached the high road the rain began. Great plashing drops that made the protection of my poor little silk sunshade worse than useless. I was rushing blindly along when I heard someone shouting to me, and looking round saw a dog-cart dashing along full speed.

"It was beside me in a moment and the horse was checked with the skill of a practised hand. The driver was Jack Enderleigh.

"'Let me give you a lift,' he cried, 'you'll be drenched to the skin in a few minutes in this downpour.'

"Rain—wind—thunder all seemed blended in confusion as his voice reached me. I gave up the battle with my mimic umbrella, took him at his word and climbed into the dog-cart. He threw a mackintosh cape over my shoulders, drew the leather apron over our knees, and then let the horse go.

"What a mad ride that was! The thunder crashed, the rain fell like a blinding stream. The inky darkness of the sky was only broken from time to time by a lurid gleam of lightning. The trees seemed to race by—and the horse plunged excitedly even under the strong firm hands that held the reins.

"As the dog-cart swayed from side to side I grasped Jack's arm. I was not alarmed, but that sudden sense of nearness and protection was wildly exhilarating.

"His eyes met mine in a brief flash. They said more than any words. The blood began to race through my veins. That sort of 'drunkenness of the senses' born of danger and excitement which is so characteristic of my race swept over me as again and again in my life it has done—to my cost.

"The horse flew along the level road, his ears laid nervously back from time to time, the foam flecking his sides and mouth as he strained frantically at the reins. It was one of those supreme moments when Life and Death seem equally balanced. A trifle—the snap of a chain—a weak shaft—a sudden jolt—and we might be hurled into Eternity!

"Jack spoke but once after that look. 'You're not frightened?' he said.

"'Frightened—with you?'

"That was all. Brief words make up life's longest histories sometimes.

. . . . . .

"To my last hour shall I ever forget that mad drive? That swift electrical glance—that delicious throb of heart and pulse—that waking of passion in desperation which means all of any worth in life!

"If only I had never known it all before. If only I could believe that knowing it *again* brought content to my unrest—stability to my inconstant nature.

"*Faugh!* why talk or write of such things? Jack Enderleigh is a million million times too good for me. I told him so in that one moment of weakness when we stood together safe—and happy I think—in the hall at Hillside.

"The footman had borne off our dripping wraps. Afternoon tea was over. No one was there. I removed my hat. In doing so the loosened pins that had held my hair dropped out. It fell in a great heavy fleece to my knees, and, half ashamed, half laughing, I turned to him.

"His strong arms were round me in a moment. I could hear the strong beats of his

heart. 'You beautiful thing!' he said, and suddenly was on his knees kissing my hands —my hair—and murmuring all the fond mad words a man utters at such times as his senses get the better of his reason.

"A hoarse cry startled us both. He sprang to his feet looking unutterably foolish. At the further end of the hall—his face ghostly—his eyes red and inflamed—his whole appearance expressive of disorder, mental and physical—stood the good Jasper!

"I have written down all the events of this most eventful day with strict accuracy.

"To give any description of my own feelings—as an epilogue—would be superfluous.

"Jasper retreated into the library. Jack and I looked foolish. The correct footman brought us tea, and Lady Slee arrived promptly to play propriety, and utter feminine interjections as to the storm and my good fortune in meeting a protector. I had hurriedly twisted up my hair on her entrance. She was one of those women who scent impropriety in dishevelled tresses, or the use of perfumes in your bath.

"I wished her at Jericho—or further. So, I am sure, did Jack. We had no opportunity for further confidences, and Lady Slee took

good care to inform him I was leaving Hillside the next morning—alluding hypocritically to what she termed 'late unfortunate events.' Then she proceeded to hint that she hoped I should soon procure another situation (that was her expression).

"I could have slain her on the spot. Instead, I remarked that my first experiences as a companion had not been so agreeable as to offer any inducement for their renewal, and that I had 'other views.'

"I scored there for she looked uncomfortable and grew very red—remembering no doubt our discussion of the morning.

"The moment I had finished my tea I left them with an excuse that my dress was damp, and Jack, not relishing the idea of a *tête-à-tête* with this Gorgon, followed my example very speedily.

"The good Jasper appeared at dinner looking white and nervous. I never saw a man so altered. He starts at every sound. His colour comes and goes, his hands tremble. He is aged by ten years since his wife's death.

"I can't imagine why he feels it so much; goodness knows he had no affection for her.

"Well—enough of Hillside and its tragedy and disagreeables. I shall shake the dust

of Coombe Abbot off my shoes with great pleasure.

"I—I wonder whether Jack will be at the station to see me off to-morrow morning.

. . . . . .

Two days later.

"Ugh! how I hate poverty! And poverty in London too. It is all so grimy and sordid, and gloomy and hateful here after the life and luxuries of Coombe Abbot.

"I have not been out of doors since I arrived. Lutie was ill and in bad spirits, and I had to nurse her, and look after the boarders and see to the details of breakfasts and luncheons and dinners, and all the time I was thinking of Jack's face and hearing Jack's voice and wishing myself back with him a thousand times a day.

"And what's the use of it all?

"What's the use of my falling in love like a schoolgirl of seventeen with a handsome face, a charming manner, and a man six years younger than myself! Not that he knows it—or anyone else for that matter. My real age is my own secret and I intend it to be so.

"I am in one of my worst moods to-day! A bitter, brutal rage with everyone and everything—with Life altogether. Why has Fate

singled me out for perpetual troubles and annoyances? Other women with not half my looks or accomplishments have all the good things of this world at their feet. I . . I alone seem swamped by misfortunes, hampered by debt and difficulty, destined to live a life of shifts and hypocrisy, for ever in want of money, and for ever pestered by men.

"I hate the whole sex to-day! From first to last—from my girlhood's lovers to my present suitor I have little to thank them for. And yet I am not quite truthful in saying *that*, for Jack is different. I know that so well, and the knowledge makes me ashamed at times.

"Oh, to be free! My God—better still to be what *he thinks me*.

"But neither is possible. I have not written to him—yet. I dare not. My pen is more apt to be truthful than my lips. My pen might betray me.

. . . . . .

"Lutie is better to-day. She came down-stairs and went about her household duties herself. About twelve o'clock, when I was sitting in my room alone indulging my 'black mood' to its utmost, and wondering what would be the next move on the board, she sent a messenger up to ask me to go down

to the drawing-room. A lady wished to see me.

"'A lady!' I repeated to Mary Jane, who gave me the message. 'Is it Lady Slee—did you hear the name?'

"Yes! Mary Jane *had* heard it. Indeed she still had the card in her apron. (Why on earth do lodging-house slaveys always answer doors or carry letters or cards with one corner of their aprons turned up? Is it from a humiliating consciousness of dirty fingers?)

"I took the slip of pasteboard and read:—

Madame Garnier,
Parisian Toilet Repository,
Jermyn Street. W.

"My first impulse was to refuse to go down. My second, that it might amuse me or lead to something. The woman had a good connection with titled and rich folk, so Lutie had told me, and I was in the mood to benefit by any folly or vice or weakness of my fellowman.

"I threw down the card—gave a look at the glass which was qualified to put me on good terms with myself, and pushing Mary Jane aside, I went down to the drawing-room.

. . . . . .

"A sallow-faced woman with about the

worst complexion I have ever beheld, dyed hair of a rusty red-brown colour, and no eyebrows to speak of, was about as bad an advertisement of her own profession of 'Beautifying' as mortal could desire.

"She rose at my entrance and her keen black eyes took in every detail of my appearance. The momentary envy which an ugly woman feels in the presence of a more favoured sister struggled in her expression with the superficial courtesy of good breeding. Her manners were excellent. Even my hypercritical Irish taste could detect nothing wanting.

"She was not French, though she had lived long enough in Paris to acquire all the little tricks and mannerisms of a *Parisienne*. The late Garnier had been a silk merchant, she informed us. He had fallen into difficulties and they had preyed on his health to such an extent that he had shuffled out of the 'mortal coil' and the silk trade at one and the same moment. His widow had gathered up the fragments of his fortune and come over to England. A happy suggestion of utilizing her knowledge of '*petits secrets*' had resulted in her opening the Toilet Repository already mentioned. She sorely needed an assistant in the business.

"I saw her eyes gleam as she stated this—and I knew that Lutie had planned this visit. Having thrown out the hint she proceeded to enlarge on the facilities for making a fortune out of the gullibility and vanity of the female mind. Already she had received hundreds of letters daily in answer to advertisements, and was obliged to employ a chemist of her own to assist in making up her preparations. Some of these were secrets entrusted to no one but herself, but others allowed of assistance without much danger of betrayal.

"I listened, but gave no hint of suspecting the motive of her visit or explanations. Naturally she grew impatient and came straight to the point.

"Women invariably do if you tax their patience.

"'Oh Madame!' she said eagerly. 'If you would only join me . . . if you *would* only just show yourself in my rooms, what an advantage—what a favour! I would even waive any question of premium. Your friend Miss Gabwell tells me that your fortunes are somewhat straitened at present. No . . . I would not ask that. Your valuable assistance would be all I should request. . . . Pray—let me beg of you to consider the matter.'

"I looked at her critically.

"'What would you require me to do?' I asked.

"A faint tinge of red crept into the sallow skin. She glanced round the room uneasily.

"'If I speak—it will be considered in strict confidence?'

"'Certainly,' I said and looked at Lutie. She nodded solemnly.

"'You know you can trust her, Madame,' she said.

"I always notice that when English people say 'Madame' they seem to think they have triumphed over an entire foreign language.

"I looked at Madame Garnier as if to say 'Continue' and she went on with explanations. It appeared she had one specialty—a Complexion wash which she was most desirous of selling. The ingredients were only known to herself, and the price was a guinea a bottle. My duty would be to advertise—in my own person—this marvellous compound. To say—in fact—that my complexion was due entirely to its use. In fact, the good lady was only employing the same dodge as the Hair Specialists who first have a good head of hair *photographed* for their advertisements, and then assure the trustful public that the luxuriant display is the

result of their nostrum, instead of a hopeful—but most uncertain—prophecy.

"Nature had given me an almost faultless complexion. I was to give Madame Garnier's Skin Tonic the credit of such an enviable possession.

"No doubt in time I should be called upon to attribute my teeth, hair, and figure—not to mention such trifles as eyelashes and eyebrows—to similar specifics. I laughed. But all the same the joke seemed not a bad one. God knows I had grudges enough to pay off against women. Fate was offering me an admirable opportunity for revenge.

"I agreed to think the matter over, but already my mind was decided to accept the post and the terms. These were liberal enough to surprise me and gave pleasant assurance of the value of natural advantages. Besides I was to have a commission on the articles I sold.

"When Madame Garnier took her leave she was decidedly impressed with me—and most anxious for a reply. This I promised to send in the course of a few days."

CHAPTER XIII.

ARTIFICE.

October 20th.

"Two weeks ago I made up my mind to accept Madame Garnier's offer, and for exactly that space of time I have been here taking stock of feminine weakness, laughing at feminine credulity, and marvelling at the vanity and conceit of the male animal. I have ascended a pinnacle from which I survey the most lamentable spectacle that civilized Humanity has to offer. Wrecks of physical beauty and physical strength, marvels of human ugliness, distortions and depravity. Greedy vanity grasping at any means of repairing the ravages of Time and dissipation. Unhealthy bodies vainly seeking to restore by Art what they have lost from outraged Nature. Poor tottering mouldy human structures, thinking that the outside whitewashing will deceive any eye as to the rottenness of the edifice it covers.

"Sometimes I laugh, more often I wonder —but all the same I *sell my Skin Tonic!* I say *mine* advisedly, for Madame Garnier has

thought fit to give to me the credit of its manufacture, as there can be no doubt my appearance is its best advertisement, and her own its worst.

"I receive the people and I take infinite credit to myself for the style in which I have got up the whole establishment. Nobody's drawing-room could be in better taste, or better furnished. Madame Garnier grumbled a little at the expense, but I assured her a business of this kind must be carried out in faultless style or it would not be patronized by the best people.

"She confesses I am right—already.

"Country customers who come up to consult us are struck dumb with wonder at the beautiful room with its subdued lights, its rich decoration, its lovely warm tones of colour, its mirrors and draperies and plants and flowers, its dainty tea-tables, and lavish supply of books and papers and magazines.

"There is even a piano on which I occasionally perform during some lengthened process of Face Massage, or Hair Tinting in the adjoining toilet boxes. There are three of these, divided by partitions each from each, so that the utmost privacy is secured and no injudicious *rencontre* need be feared.

"All the consulting patients are received

in the large salon, one at a time by special appointment.

"If no appointment has been made they have to take their chance.

"Town is still comparatively empty and most of our business at present is done by correspondence for which we employ a typist. The amount of work to be got through in a day is simply astounding. Madame Garnier, who lives on the premises, gives from eight o'clock to ten to reading her correspondence. At ten I arrive and take possession of the Salon.

"A page in neat livery opens the door and announces the customers. I receive them *en grande tenue* and never fail to make an impression. The simpler cases are only asked to try the Skin Tonic—the more difficult I hand over to Madame Garnier for massage treatment.

"As for the men—God help the creatures! No Sarah-Grand crusade could ever put a spark of manly feeling into the feeble effete youths—victims of eczema, acne or scrofulous irritations—or into the doddering old idiots, cased in corsets, dyed, powdered, painted, perfumed into something so pitiable and humiliating that I can only shudder and wonder what Life can mean for them. And to these creat-

ures I have to talk and laugh, encourage and flatter, and by them to be ogled and leered at as a 'deuced fine woman, by Gad!'

"One or two have tried to go further than that—but I read them a lesson which made them look even smaller and more shrunken and abject, than age and vice had done.

"As for the profits of the establishment they promise well. In these three weeks we have never had *less* than thirty visitors a day and everyone of the thirty spent from two to five guineas. We average sixty to seventy pounds daily without reckoning country and town orders in answer to advertisements.

"The celebrated Tonic costs about one shilling and ten pence to make and is sold at a guinea. This is the average profit on all Madame's articles. I foresee a very fair income at the year's end—if no ill fate intervenes. By which I mean the inevitable discovery which comes sooner or later that the marvellous specifics are not marvellous at all, and that cold water and good yellow soap, and fresh air and simple food would be of infinitely more benefit.

"It is strange, however, that once the victims of 'make up' take seriously to it, it is almost impossible to make them give it up.

"They go from bad to worse until at last they look such pitiable objects that one can but marvel whether their natural condition isn't best concealed after all—even as one gives a friendly dash from the whitewasher's pail to some dilapidated old structure. As far as I am concerned I never touch the stuffs, but that is certainly my good fortune. Very few women, even in my own land of lovely complexions and colouring, can boast of a skin like mine. No wonder the Skin Tonic sells—and Madame chuckles over its concoction! At this rate I shall treble her connection for her.

"If I were a novelist, what a sphere I should find this for the study of character!

"The proudest old dowager who drives up in her coroneted carriage with her powdered footman, sinks into the most abject humility before me when, with my 'grand air' and my faultless skin and figure, I have to ask her to wash off her pigments and submit to Madame's inspection. Oh ye gods! talk of whited sepulchres! Such bones—and bare craniums—such yellow wrinkled skins—such glued and dyed eyebrows!

"At times a shudder of disgust—too genuine for success in such a business—runs through me as the wreck of Nature is so

pitifully revealed—or some abject entreaty reaches me—'Oh, *do* promise me that the Tonic will really be beneficial. *I have tried so many things.*'

"I give the assurance without a qualm of conscience now.

"'It will be as beneficial as anything can be on this side of the grave. At all events it can do no harm.'

"My trump card is always held to the end. The money has been paid, the parcel is made up. Then I say, 'Understand, Madam, that *on no account* must you use any other cosmetic while under this treatment!'

"The poor victim looks at me in horror. 'Do you mean no powder or . . . colouring? Dear me! what shall I do!'

"'You will entirely counteract the good effects of the Tonic if you rouge or powder your face,' I repeat.

"She promises—and goes her way. I know perfectly well that she *won't* give up her rouge—and that if she utters any complaint as to the failure of the remedy—or its tardy effects on her wrinkled old visage, I have my answer ready.

"And so the game goes on—and the *profits accumulate!*"

CHAPTER XIV.

FEELING THE PULSE OF DANGER.

"It was growing dusk—the dreary dusk of a December day—and I was sitting over the fire in our luxuriously fitted up salon, yawning my head off, and vainly trying to interest myself in a novel.

"Madame Garnier had gone out to do some shopping and I was alone. The tea-table was drawn up near the fire. The kettle hissing over the spirit-stand. I was just thinking of ringing for lights when the door opened and the page announced a visitor. In the dim light I only saw a man's figure stumbling forward with a man's awkwardness among the lounges, stools, and tables scattered about.

"I stooped forward and stirred the fire into a blaze. Then turned to greet the supposed customer with my usual air of affability :—

"'What can I have the pleasure of——'

"My tongue stopped, paralyzed almost by astonishment and something not unlike fear.

"I was confronted by the white flabby face

and the shrunken, strangely-altered figure of Jasper Oldreeve!

"His name faltered from my lips as he extended his hand, and a vague uneasiness seized me—remembering my oath.

"'How on earth did you find me out?' I exclaimed, pointing to a chair and re-seating myself in my own.

"'Where there's a will there's a way,' he answered with ponderous playfulness as he took the seat indicated, and then surveyed me with a strange hungry look in his wide blue eyes that made me feel cold and sick. I had seen that look in men's eyes before and I—liked it not.

"'You did not fancy you could hide from me, did you?' he went on. 'Had you gone to the ends of the earth I should have found you. Something in you draws me as the magnet draws the needle. The passion you have roused in me is no milk-and-water schoolboy love—to feed on dreams and be satisfied. It is more exacting than any feeling or relation of my life hitherto.'

"I had tried to stop him. It was useless. He had come here to speak and speak he would. With a sense of disgust and annoyance I leant back and looked at him. His face

was flushed, his hands shook. His agitation was not more becoming to him than it is to any man who is desperately in earnest before a woman's criticism. The stream of words poured on. The old, old story—God! how often I've heard it!

"I could have laughed in his face only that I was not in a laughing humour. Indeed, I was more annoyed than amused. Love has much to answer for—and Love had worked a strange transformation in the good Jasper!

"I suppose he must have observed my indifference at last for he suddenly paused, and then our eyes met. The colour in his face changed to a sickly pallor.

"'I—I hope I've not offended you,' he stammered. 'Surely you *knew?* All that time at Hillside you must have guessed——'

"'Mr. Oldreeve!' I said indignantly, 'I never imagined your attentions meant more than the courtesy of a gentleman to a lady staying under his roof. To come to me now—before your wife has been two months in her grave—and profess such a—a passion, as you call it, is in very bad taste, I assure you, especially as I have never given you any encouragement to do such a thing.'

"He fairly gasped. 'No encouragement!'

he repeated. 'Why, every glance that led me on, every smile that lured me to forgetfulness of duty and *honour*, were encouragement. Every action promised my reward should accident—or——'

"He stopped again and wiped his ghastly face with his handkerchief. I looked at him keenly. He was more agitated than the occasion seemed to warrant. A strange hateful suspicion shot through my mind. How—why—or whence it came I know not. It was a flash of woman's intuition.

"Perhaps some of the horror of my thoughts was in my eyes, for he grew paler still as he looked at me—and the cold dew on his forehead stood out in great beads.

"'No—no—' he stammered in confusion, 'I am not blaming you. My feelings run away with me—pray forgive what I said. I can be very patient—indeed I can. One page of my life is folded over for ever—but I will be in no unseemly haste to open the fresh one. Only assure me there is no other . . . that I may hope?'

"He held out his hands entreatingly—but the sight of those supple nervous fingers only inspired me with fresh horror. I shrank away.

"'No—no,' I cried impulsively, 'I can't say that—I can't promise anything!'

"He rose slowly and unsteadily to his feet—and stood leaning against the mantelshelf looking down at me.

"'No hope? Do you mean to say there is *no hope?* That after I have suffered for you—*sinned* for you——'

"I cried out impulsively. My horror of what he might say made me eager to stay a confession at all hazards.

"'You are labouring under a delusion,' I said. 'I never had any feeling for you but friendship. If . . . if I seemed to show anything more it was only pity—the pity I felt for your unhappy life——'

"A sort of groan cut me short. He turned away and folded his arms on the low mantelshelf and laid his head upon them.

"His silence was more trying than his words had been. I felt I should scream if this scene went on much longer. The sight of that quiet figure—the echo of that heart-breaking groan thrilled every nerve with positive pain. I wished Madame would return. Anything to break up the scene—to offer an interruption.

"Suddenly he lifted his head, and faced round on me with something of defiance.

"'I can't believe you mean to be cruel,' he said; 'it is not only love I offer you—a man's whole heart and soul—but riches—comfort—position, all that the world has denied you as you once confessed. Think well—do not decide in haste. I will teach myself to be patient—only don't send me from you. I can't *live* without you. You are more than life to me! Haven't I proved it—haven't I perilled soul and body for your sake?'

"Again those rash wild words. Again that odd feeling of repulsion and fear on my part.

"I rose—my hands went out instinctively as if to ward off a blow.

"'I don't understand you,' I said.

"He came closer. I had a terrified sickening feeling of a grasp—a hot breath—a hissing whisper.

"'I *freed* myself—for you. Do you understand now?—for *you*. You tempted and I fell. But none the less *both* are bound by the tie of guilt. Together we stand or fall. I shall not let you go this side the grave—I *swear it*.'

"Whether I shrieked or cried, or what, I cannot now remember. The hideous truth flashed in naked bareness before my eyes.

"I saw the reward of my vanity—my folly—

my idiotic coquetry in the proffered love of—a murderer!

. . . . . .

"How that scene lives before me again as I write of it. How the hateful touch of that man seems still to cling and burn my flesh. How my poor distracted mind tortures itself with vain questions and interminable wonder at my own stupidity. A light has been thrown over the dark mystery of Mrs. Oldreeve's death—the light of her husband's confession.

"For the first time in my life I stood face to face with crime. It is not a thing read of in the newspaper columns—talked of—rumoured—but an actual fact touching and concerning myself with a nearness that makes me shudder.

"Fortunately for me Madame Garnier appeared on the scene at that desperate juncture when the wretched man's self-betrayal had well-nigh put me at his mercy. God knows what I might have promised or done at that moment. My nerves were all unstrung—every fibre of me quivered with horror. I felt myself in the presence of a madman—and my sole thought was of escape.

"At Madame Garnier's entrance he recovered his composure, and I faltered out some stupid explanation as to his being a friend who had

called to see me. He grasped the situation and made some excuse for intruding on my place of business. He would call at Gower Street the next day—Sunday.

"I agreed weakly enough and thankfully saw him depart.

"Madame Garnier made no remark. She saw so many extraordinary people that one more or less did not count. Besides the room was half dark, and his confusion less apparent than it might have been.

"And now I ask myself in despair *what am I to do?*

"The man is both desperate and dangerous. His threats, irrational as they are, have yet filled me with an unreasoning terror.

"Was ever woman plagued as I am?

"I am not in a position yet to face exposure or bring the sleuth-hounds of scandal on my track once more.

"I have taken counsel with Lutie. Indeed I was in such agitation when I returned from Jermyn Street that she noticed something was amiss.

"I was furious at her for giving my address —though on reflection I saw that he would have gained his purpose without it. He would have seen me *here* instead. How he

had remembered the Gower Street address I could not imagine. Perhaps my first letter had been among his wife's papers. But what matters the why and wherefore of a result? It is the result itself with which one has to deal, and I sit here burning the midnight oil and perplexing myself with a thousand questions and—yet arrive at no decision. Lutie cuts the Gordian knot by advising me to tell him I can't marry him simply because I have a husband living. But I should hate to do that. He might tell Jack Enderleigh—or he might refuse to believe me—and then the proofs are not of the most creditable nature in the world—and would have to be furnished by newspaper cuttings——

"Was ever woman so unfortunate? Just as everything looked prosperous and pleasant at Coombe Abbot came the catastrophe of Mrs. Oldreeve's death. Just as I am established in my new business and have a prospect of counting on a safe income of a clear thousand a year this unlucky *contretemps* threatens me.

. . . . . .

"I wonder why I keep on writing all this: I am so tired I can hardly hold my head up, and yet I *daren't* go to bed. I am haunted by that

man's dreadful looks—and dreadful words—haunted by the hateful curiosity as to *how* he committed the deed, and how he has escaped detection.

"*Detection!*

"As the word faces me I remember he is in my power. A word from me and the Law he has evaded lays its strong grasp upon him—and I'm safe.

"Can I speak the word?

"Dare I speak it? . . . The pen dropped—leaving a long black smudge on the white paper. My distorted fancy seemed to see in it the picture of a gallows!

" . . . Ugh! how lonely and still the house is. So lonely that the tramp of the policeman in the street below is plainly audible. How regularly he paces to and fro . . . and what a short distance his beat seems to take him . . .

"Impelled by curiosity I rose a moment ago and looked out of the window of my room. A lamp-post faces the house. Its rays fell on the pavement—dark now with mud and rain.

"The footstep again approached.

"The steady tramp was no policeman's foot as I had supposed. A figure shrouded in a heavy overcoat—the collar turned up round the face—was pacing slowly before the house.

As I stood gazing down—the blind in my hand—it turned, paused, looked up.

"Full and clear the lamplight fell on the face.

"I dropped the blind. An inevitable conclusion forced itself upon me.

"There, watchful, sleepless as myself, stood the man who had fastened himself on my life—Jasper Oldreeve!"

CHAPTER XV.

VICTORY.

"To wake up in the morning with a clear head, a steady pulse, and a cool determination to face the worst was a matter of surprise to myself.

"I have to thank one of Madame Garnier's recipes for it. I do not state *what* the mystic remedy was, though I don't mind confessing I had no faith in it, despite her earnest recommendation and the many eulogies it had won from fagged and dissipated society women. Desperation induced me to make a trial of it, and I slept like an untroubled child till the Church bells' clanguor roused me next morning.

"I rose and dressed hastily—caring little for my appearance. Jasper Oldreeve was to call at twelve o'clock. I was awaiting him a few minutes before that hour in Lutie's private sitting-room.

"Needless to say she kept strictly out of the way. Neither of us had any desire to re-

vive Mrs. Shetland Mackenzie. When I say *here*, where at least I speak truth, that the sound of the door-bell, and the approach of a footstep raised neither flutter nor tremor in my heart, I think I pay the best compliment of steady nerves to Madame Garnier's 'Soothing Drops.'

"He was painfully agitated. I could see that. He looked like a man recovering from a severe drinking bout. His eyes were blood-shot, his hands shook, the muscles of his mouth were all relaxed.

"I saw at a glance that the chances were against him. It was not by any means the *first* time in my life I had had to face a man in a battle of wits. The whole series of events under which I had chafed and fretted yesterday, seemed conquerable to-day. I was not frightened now of Mr. Jasper Oldreeve. I evaded his hand when he held it out. I could smile and laugh and talk to him, but I could not bear his touch. There was something repulsive to me in the sight of those white restless fingers. My dislike to him had increased steadily to something very like hate.

"I have always had a horror of coercion. Its only effect is to drive me into rebellion—open or secret as the case may be.

"I plunged into the subject at once, before he had time to collect his senses, or subdue the passionate emotion which my presence only too readily evoked in his weak brain.

"'Mr. Oldreeve,' I said, 'I must speak very plainly to you. You were good enough yesterday to make me an offer, and you appeared to think you were justified in doing so by what you termed "encouragement" on my part. If there was any such encouragement you must lay the blame to my unfortunate nationality. You cold English can never understand that there is an amount of give and take—friendliness, *camaraderie*, in short—among Irishmen and Irishwomen which is perfectly harmless but which *you* would call flirtation. Now, in your position at Hillside I gave no thought to *any* serious meaning on your part. No, don't speak. You must hear me out. In the first place you were a married man. In the second you had what I must delicately term an "entanglement." In the third and last, I—am not a free woman.'

"My voice faltered there. I bent my head to hide confusion, or shame or anything he chose to place as interpretation of my agitation. But under my lowered lids my eyes read him like a book.

"*Every shot had told.*

"He simply sat there dumb and motionless, unable to utter a word. I opened fire again.

"'Under these circumstances,' I said, 'you must see that our interview of yesterday had best be forgotten by both of us. I would rather *not* refer to the rash statements you made, I cannot believe they were uttered seriously. As far as your feelings for me are concerned I can only deplore their existence, and assure you I deeply regret any part in arousing them. Once for all, Mr. Oldreeve, it is part of my unhappy fate that I can marry no man—however worthy. When I have said that, you, as a gentleman, will surely not press me any further.'

"He sprang to his feet, his eyes ablaze. 'Why do you tell me this *now?*' he cried hoarsely. 'Now when it is too late? Now when——'

"'It was my secret,' I said boldly, in the broken pause of his shaken voice. 'Why should I have confessed it *without reason?* I am none too proud of my married life. I have separated myself from the brute who made it a veritable hell for me, but I cannot marry. He—will not free me.'

"(A lie that was half a truth. Powers of

Heaven, how often had such a lie saved me in crises like this! Would it serve me now?)

"He paced the room in strong agitation.

"'If I had known!' That was all he said again and again. 'God of Mercy! If I had only known!'

"Poor wretch! For a moment I almost pitied him. Passion had hurried him into crime, and now that crime was useless. Its price was denied him—its results alone faced him in a dread that would never die, a shame that would sap his very life and fill its every hour with horror.

"He took no notice of my second shaft. The third—the deadly one that pierced him to the core—alone usurped his attention. At last he threw himself down on the hard old horse-hair sofa and hid his face in his hands.

"'You are the cruellest woman on all God's earth, I think,' he said at last. 'When I remember how you lured me on—of what I have done for your sake—I—I—could kill you.'

"'Surely,' I said icily, 'one murder in a lifetime is enough; though they say a man is rarely content without giving it a successor.'

"It was brutal of me, it was horrible, I know, but I felt mad with rage, and the shame

of his presence, and the horror of his accusations of myself.

"Perhaps conscience told me they were not altogether unmerited. I had flirted with him before Jack Enderleigh came on the scene. In a sudden flash I saw revealed all the mischief I had done—at first thoughtlessly, then out of pure devilment.

"I felt almost the vile thing he seemed to think me, while my emotional temperament swayed me hither and thither on the stream of accusing memories.

"He looked at me with dull bewildered eyes.

"'Murder!' he said in a hoarse whisper, 'who dares say that? It was only . . . only an accident. She was in pain, she asked for the needle. I—I might not have counted the drops quite—accurately——'

"A shudder shook his frame. Great drops of sweat stood on his brow. I thought what a fool he was to tell all this to me.

"What woman ever keeps a secret unless it concerns herself?

"Then, suddenly by a strong effort, he seemed to calm himself. 'At least,' he said, 'if you cannot be my wife you can be no other man's either.'

"'True,' I said coldly. 'But believe me, Mr. Oldreeve, marriage offers no temptation to me. I know too much of your sex to risk a livelong bondage again.'

"He looked at me, his eyes glowing and darkening beneath the fever of his thoughts; the chained passions of his nature loosed at last.

"What he said, what he prayed, what mad, hateful things fell from his lips I cannot write even here, where only my own eyes may see them.

"I grew sick with shame and disgust. Well, as I know men, I had a dim hope that there might be found, here and there, one in whom the evil was not so near the surface of professed passion, one to whom a woman was not merely *prey* because of her sex.

"The storm passed and again I conquered. I was stronger than he, colder, steadier, more pitiless. Victory could not but remain in my hands.

"He saw soon that I had nothing to fear, and he nothing to hope. Neither love nor riches tempted me when he played the Faust. His foolish threats passed by my indifference like an idle breath. What could he do that would affect me without putting a rope round his own neck? He saw that, I think, and his

futile rage and baffled passion gave me a terrible half hour. If I had not been very firm, it would have fared ill with me. There is no greater brute than your mild man when his passions are thoroughly roused. For him baffled love means only baffled lust. He is without scruple and without mercy.

. . . . . .

"Fairly worn out I saw him leave at last. I had promised to write occasionally; to see him, also occasionally, when he came up to Town. Then I gave him two cautions.

"'You have to live down the tragedy of your wife's death in a scandalous and evil thinking neighbourhood. You have an unscrupulous enemy in your own household—Rosalie, the French maid.'

"'Rosalie?' he repeated. 'She left Coombe Abbot long ago. She is with Lady Slee in London.'

"In London! A little uncomfortable thrill ran through me, the feeling of insecurity that arises from consciousness of an enemy's presence.

"'I don't care where she is,' I told him. 'She is dangerous, and you had best be careful. Besides, she is *jealous*'—I added with meaning emphasis. 'She knows some-

thing and suspects more, and she is not over-scrupulous.'

"'I know that,' he stammered, huskily. 'I was in hopes I had rid myself of her.'

"I laughed scornfully. 'She is not the sort of woman to rid oneself of very easily,' I said. 'She knows too much to lose sight of the market for her knowledge.'

"He stood there awkward and embarrassed, his hat in his hand, his colour coming and going like that of a foolish schoolboy.

"'I have one thing more to say,' he faltered. 'If—if you should ever be free, might I hope for a different answer?'

"I started. I could not help it, well as I had drilled myself.

"It is not likely I ever shall be free,' I said. 'The—the man to whom I am bound is young—strong, and has as good a chance of life as I myself.'

"'But could you not force him into a divorce?' he went on eagerly.

"I looked virtuous indignation at the suggestion. 'I wouldn't attempt such a proceeding.'

"He stood there still, though my hand was on the bell and every line of face and figure must surely have breathed—'Go!'

"Then he said slowly and significantly: 'Hope is hard to kill. I shall hope—and *wait*.'

"I made no answer. Patience failed me at last. I rang the bell, and as the front door closed I sank back into my chair and went off into violent hysterics, which took Lutie and Martha the rest of the morning to subdue.

. . . . . .

"One has to pay the penalty of a victory, be it great or small."

CHAPTER XVI.

PRO BONO PUBLICO.

"THEY say 'the happy have no histories.' In like manner the absence of entries in my diary of late, points to a lack of incident in my eventful life. To me incident is usually of an unpleasant nature. I rarely have anything agreeable to chronicle.

"Still I am thankful for a week's peace.

"Seven days without anything untoward happening—seven nights of calm deep sleep. No wonder I feel braced up. With my fatal Irish buoyancy of temperament I begin to believe that my troubles are over, at least for a time—and to throw myself into my new work with fresh interest. Town is filling rapidly and customers are more numerous. The fame of the 'Skin Tonic' is spreading, and Madame Garnier has added other items to her list of 'Aids to Beauty.' Her wonderful 'Hair Tinting' brings innumerable applicants, and sometimes every hour of her day is filled up. It amuses me to see women come in one colour

and go out another. I wonder what their footmen think?

"I wonder, too, how Madame Garnier can have the patience to mess about with those poor faded wisps of hair. No wonder her charges are high! If things go on like this she will soon make a fortune.

. . . . . .

"I was alone this morning when a card was brought me by the page. I saw it bore the name of a certain Lady's newspaper recently started, and had '*Favoured by the Editor*' in the corner.

"The lady came with a twofold purpose. 1st, would Madame allow herself to be interviewed? 2nd, would she take a page of the paper for her advertisements on moderate terms? If so they would arrange for their Toilet Editress to puff all her recipes.

"As Madame Garnier usually left these matters to me I debated for a short time and then agreed. As far as the interview was concerned I—as her representative—insisted upon its being done on the spot, and arranged quite a romantic history, with accessories for the benefit of 'the Leader of Fashion' readers. I enjoyed it immensely, especially

when allusions to a 'faultless complexion' and magnificent *chevelure* were sprinkled through the paragraphs. (My royalties would be worth something after *that!*) When the interview was over the question of the sum to be spent on advertising aroused all my business instincts. Advertising is an expensive process. But it is necessary. It is astonishing what the British public will believe, wear, eat, drink and *use* if the thing has only been blazoned before their eyes long enough for them to recognize it. Then they believe in it, and get it. In the first place a lot of money must have been spent on bringing the invention into notice, and the fact of a 'lot of money' being spent on anything argues in John Bull's mind that there must be some merit in it.

"Moreover, there is a class of persons who seem to exist in the world for the sole purpose of being gulled. It is their nature, their province, their mission in life. If one person doesn't gull them, another will. I therefore thought Madame Garnier might as well have her opportunity, and after some haggling and objections managed to secure the rights of a column for the sum of £6 weekly.

"Having concluded a good morning's work and hinted at the titled notabilities who were

among our *clientèle*, I dismissed my interviewer and awaited results.

"The week after that advertisement appeared the numbers of anxious enquirers who applied to 'Florizel' the Toilet Editress for information as to treatment of pimples, blotches, red noses, scanty hair, superfluous hair, want of eyelashes, and other personal defects were numerous enough to make one wonder whether there was a Blight on Beauty, as sometimes happens with potatoes. But one and all were soon assured that an application by post or in person to Madame Garnier's magnificent Toilet Emporium would relieve all skin defects and make them 'beautiful for ever.'

"*They evidently believed it.* The amount of letters and postal orders that poured in on us after the issue of that week's number was simply appalling. Madame had to engage a special chemist to make up her washes and dyes, and the business we gave him promised to compensate for a long struggle with legitimate drugs, and 'Store' prices.

"Callers were so numerous that I began to flag, and resolved to ask Madame Garnier to have another assistant. I mentioned this to Lutie and she again offered to give up the care of boarders and join us, but I doubted her

qualifications and opposed the idea. After all 'Beauty Embellishing' is a ticklish thing. A very little whisper sometimes damages a business, and women can be very spiteful. At times when some fearful old hag was grumbling at her unimproved appearance and our prices I almost lost my temper. Did she really fancy we could put back the hands of Time—giving her the firm, fair skin of youth, the glowing freshness of seventeen at sixty!

"Occasionally we did wonders, and then trade grew brisk indeed. Some complexions really allowed of improvement. Massage, vigorous application of soap and water, a judicious touch of colour and a dust of *poudre de riz* would turn a plain face into quite a presentable one. But then one had something to work on. Given a thick skin, passable features, good eyes, and it was easy to make forty a very decent thirty, or put thirty back to twenty-five. But the hopeless cases were the old half-palsied creatures of either sex who had ruined their constitution, or impaired their health, or irretrievably damaged their complexions by all sorts of pigments and washes. Their very hopelessness made them all the more obstinate. They would refuse to go away without *something* being done, and Ma-

dame Garnier could but shrug her shoulders and plaster them up till they looked like caricatures of nature and were only safe in a darkened room. Their bleared old eyes scrutinized the 'improvement' with that fond belief in its utter invisibility to other eyes that is so characteristic of people who 'make up.' They wrote their cheques and tottered out to their broughams or cabs, as the case might be, with a satisfied security on their withered lips, and a rooted conviction that they could safely face the Park under rose-lined sunshades or curly-brimmed hats.

"Truly a world of fools is ruled by vanity.

"I am growing hardened to it all now, but heartily sick of it. Yet I can't afford to throw it up. In what other business or occupation would I be likely to make so much money?

. . . . . .

"Dec. 13th. The six months were up a week ago. I have been expecting to hear from the lawyers that the 'decree absolute' was pronounced. But no word has come. I will try and get out for an hour to-morrow and call at Lincoln's Inn.

"A letter came this morning from Jasper Oldreeve. The same maudlin story. How I hate the man—how I wish I could shake him

off! I wrote a few lines—just to keep him quiet. I am afraid of his coming up to see me again. . . .

"Dec. 15th. Home after a long fatiguing day. More worries and troubles. First, the lawyers informed me that they had received no instructions from Mr. Garbett to make the application necessary for the decree. They believed he had gone abroad, but in any case they were unable to act without such instructions.

"I almost lost my temper.

"'Abroad! And you don't know where to find him, and I am left in this ambiguous position! I shall apply to the judge myself.'

"They smiled compassionately and got down some odious books and proceeded to read paragraphs to the effect that the 'Final application for nullity of marriage must be made by the petitioner in the case—not by the respondent.'

"'Then,' I cried indignantly, 'am I to wait on in this fashion until he chooses to conclude the matter?'

"That was just my position they assured me.

"I burst out into indignant denunciation of

the law—its injustice to women, its proverbial one-sidedness, its delays, expenses and general inability. They only smiled and bent their heads to the storm as if used to it. Heaven knows they've reason to be if they've many female clients.

"I put it to them that if the co-respondent was willing to marry the *divorcée*, or if a child was expected, the law was exceedingly cruel in not permitting *her* to make the application. They quite agreed with me, but there the hateful unjust thing stood in black and white, made as I've always maintained *by* men, *for* men. Women, as usual, get the worst of it.

"I returned to the charge again. Was there no redress—could nothing be done? Couldn't I claim support or alimony? Yes—I could apply for Mr. Garbett to furnish me with money if I was prepared to show I had no means of support. This would necessitate the case coming on again, however, and bring my name and misdemeanour once more before the public. And then I must find out where he was, and *have him served with the necessary papers at my own cost!*

"Is it any wonder I lost my temper? Was anything more stupid, and useless, and idiotic ever framed and passed into a statute? I've

never been an advocate of Woman's Rights, but from the moment I had the Law of Divorce explained to me I would uphold them, their denunciation-lectures, platform orations and general condemnation of man and his ways, with all the eloquence and zeal of the most inveterate emancipator!

"I left Lincoln's Inn in a boiling rage. I sent a telegram to Jermyn Street to say I should not be able to return that afternoon, and then took a hansom back to Gower Street and vented my ill-humour on Lutie, who was all sympathy and commiseration.

"'But, after all,' she said, with her usual tactless stupidity, 'what does it matter? It's not as *if you wanted to marry anyone else!*'

"I flashed one look, and then swept out of the room and gave myself up to hysterical sobs and fierce denunciations against my ill-luck.

"And all the time I only saw Jack Enderleigh's handsome face and heard his voice echoing in my ear—and felt again that old wild thrill when his kisses had touched my hands in the darkened hall at Hillside!

"Oh! what a vile wretch I am! and what a vile world this is!

Midnight.

"I dragged Lutie off to the theatre in sheer desperation. Anything was better than my own thoughts, my own mood. The piece was silly and vapid. No one knows how to write plays nowadays!

"I returned in as ill-humour as I went. A letter lay on the hall-table. It had come by the last post. I recognized Madame Garnier's small firm hand, and lilac ink. It was to the effect that several people had applied that day for the post of assistant. She had advertised for one the previous day. Among those applicants was a Frenchwoman whom she had met in Paris years before. She seemed just suited to the place and was a fair linguist, besides being able to apply any of the remedies —washes, or dyes—with the skill of her countrywomen and the advantages of long practice as a lady's maid. She had therefore engaged her at once and on receipt of my telegram had kept her at work all that afternoon. She had proved very satisfactory.

"I threw the letter aside. My work would be lighter, but I did not know how I should get on with this assistant.

"However, among big worries, little ones sink into insignificance!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A RENCONTRE.

Dec. 18th.

"I WENT to Madame Garnier's this morning in a most miserable state of mind.

"The first person I saw seated in the salon, beautifully dressed and 'made up,' was Rosalie Brunêt.

"My start of annoyance called up some real colour to her sallow skin. She looked equally astonished. I suppose Madame Garnier had not told her my name.

"'Comment—*mais*, how is this? You here?' she hissed.

"'I am Madame Garnier's partner,' I said coldly. 'I suppose you are the assistant she engaged yesterday.'

"Yes, she had that honour. Everything had been quite satisfactory. She had made Madame's acquaintance in Paris. Madame was all that was estimable and kind. She heard she had established a magnificent business. She would be delighted to give her poor services—but—to see *me* here . . .

"I cut her short. I was in the worst possible temper and she saw it.

"'You have your duties to attend to. I have mine. There is no need for any more discussion,' I said.

"She looked at me with some apprehension.

"'You are not pleased? Say then is it that you intend to set Madame against me?'

"'I shall not trouble myself about you in the least,' I answered, 'if you attend to your duties. But I will stand no nonsense, and I will have no repetition of such scenes as those at Coombe Abbot. This is a good situation for you, and you will make three times the money you did as lady's maid. But remember, *I* am the chief person in the establishment. If I say a word I can have you dismissed.'

"She surveyed me doubtfully for a moment. There was an ominous flash in her eye, but she kept herself well in hand.

"'I have come here,' she said, 'for a purpose. What it is matters not. I am tired of being the slave of ladies; I will have no more. I promise you to keep my place. I know you have kept your promise. Let us be friends.'

"It was the friendship of a serpent sheathing its head, concealing its venom. I knew that. But I pretended to believe her.

"When Madame Garnier came in she found us calmly talking over the affairs of the Emporium and deeply interested in the mysteries of Art. The work of the day commenced. The old dreary, sickening business which I was beginning to detest so heartily.

"I would have thrown it up in one of my impulses of disgust, but I knew I should be long in finding another that would bring me in so much money. And yet what was the use of the money? No one I cared about saw my fine dresses, or the jewellery I had at last redeemed. The doors of Society were for ever shut against me. I saw a vista of hopeless years stretching before me and shuddered at the sight. In them all no pure or healthy feeling, no definite aim, only loss of youth and beauty, the career of an adventuress—the end of——

"No wonder I shuddered with horror. No wonder I cursed my miserable fate. I could never be *quite* safe. I could never own a name that was free from reproach, a station that could not be assailed. Honour, wealth, fair repute—they were not for me, and I knew in my heart of hearts I had only myself to blame. . . . Had I ever been a good woman?

"What is the use of asking such a question

of Night and the Silence? And after all what is goodness but absence of temptation? My life has been all temptation from the hour I left my father's house in that wretched little Irish village to the present moment.

"For the present temptation is to—end it.

"How tempting the Drops look. A long deep sleep, and then no more waking to the fret and fever of life—no more——

"What stopped my hand here?

"A moment ago I had thrown down my pen and was holding the laudanum bottle in my hand. Then sharp and swift a thought flashed across my brain—*Jack!*

"God knows what made me think of him in such a moment. What brought that sudden throb of tenderness to my wicked heart. My hand shook, I laid the bottle aside. I came back and sat here looking at this blurred and blotted page. No, I won't say good-bye to life yet.

"Who knows but that I may yet be free, may yet be happy?

"Hope is hard to kill, and I am by nature hopeful. I may be free—soon. Any mail may bring that welcome release. I might marry Jack. Yet I've vowed to eschew mat-

rimony for the future, and why should I do him so great a wrong?

"If he knew me *as I am*——

"There! I'm getting morbid again. No man ever knows a woman *really* as she is. I shall be no more deceptive than the rest of my deceitful sex. For we are all *that*, let the moralists say what they please, only some women deceive consciously, and some unconsciously, but not one would *dare* show her real true self. No more I suppose would any man. So we are quits there!

. . . . . .

"I felt too ill and depressed to go to Jermyn Street to-day. I woke with an aching head and that terrible fit of the blues still mastering me. I wired an excuse to Madame Garnier, had my breakfast in bed, and about two o'clock put on my bonnet, drove to the Circus and then walked down to Bond Street.

"Considering the time of year the day was wonderfully fine. A soft grey sky through which came glints of sunshine set me thinking of a new harmony in colour. Nature often gives us hints if we only care to utilize them. I had to thank a pansy once for one of my most successful combinations, the deep purple, the delicious gleam of gold and the faint green

of the leaves were carried out to perfection. I was gazing abstractedly into the shop windows as I passed. How well I knew them all! Redmayne's, Nicole's, Russell and Allen's, Charbonnel's dainty confectionery—Atkinson's exquisite perfumes, Trufitt's marvels in coiffures —Storr and Mortimer's tempting display of gems and *parures* and gold and silver plate. From there I crossed the road and moved by some freak of fancy found myself entering the Doré Gallery.

"It was comparatively empty. I took a seat opposite my favourite 'Christ leaving the Prætorium' and sat there in that state of dreamy indolence which with me is the reaction of very strong emotion. Several people were moving about criticizing the enormous cartoons and talking in that subdued whisper which is the characteristic of the British public in the presence of Art.

"Among them I noted a tall figure—a close cropped head of fair hair, a back and shoulders that had something familiar about them. I bent eagerly forward. The head slightly turned. It was Jack Enderleigh!

"For a moment the shock and surprise of seeing him turned me faint and trembling as any love-sick schoolgirl. Then as my nerves

steadied themselves I discovered he was not alone. Two ladies were beside him, one elderly, in furs and velvets, the other young and pretty in dark green cloth and astrachan. A jealous pang shot through my heart. I took in every detail of the tall slight figure, the glint of pale gold hair knotted at the back of the head, even the bunch of violets nestled among the astrachan of her perfectly cut jacket. She was young—probably not twenty—and I—Well, the less said about age the better. I know I did not *look* thirty. I watched them closely. A feeling I had never experienced in my life before was wringing my very heart with sharp pain.

"I had left Jack abruptly—I had not written to him—I had never even given him any definite answer to his avowal of love—but yet all this time I had had an instinctive feeling that he was mine—only mine. That at some future time I would call him to my side, and——

"Well, up to the present my thoughts had never gone further than that. But now the fact of seeing him before me again, handsomer than ever, and all attention to another woman drove me desperate.

"I wondered how I was looking? I was

always well dressed for the street, but I thought to-day I might have been more becomingly so. However, my mind was made up. Speak to Jack I must, in spite of a hundred girls. I rose and sauntered slowly after the trio.

"Presently they turned and glanced up the long room. Jack's eyes met mine. I saw him start and flush to his very brows. He made some hurried apology to his companion, and in another instant was holding my hand and looking all his honest soul into my eyes.

"'Fancy meeting you like this! Why have you treated me so badly? You promised me your address and I've been patiently waiting for it. How well you're looking!'—(this reproachfully).

"I murmured something incoherent—business—worries—engagements—in any case he didn't heed them. He was too much occupied in looking at me.

"My jealous fears died out. I saw he was still 'captive of my bow and spear.'

"'You are with friends?' I said at last.

"'Yes, worse luck! An aunt and cousin, and they would go picture-gallerying. I hate it. I'm staying there for Christmas, Stanhope Crescent. Where are you? Couldn't I call? Are you engaged this evening?'

"'No,' I said. 'But I'm only at a boarding-house; it's wretched.'

"'Can I come and take you out to dinner? *Café Royal*—Blanchard's—where you like? Say yes, there's a darling. I can't stay here now.'

"I looked at him. His blue eyes were glowing, his handsome face was all fire and eagerness. Not the coldest woman in Christendom, not even Ouida's Vera could have resisted Jack when he looked like that. I was not a cold woman and I have always heartily despised Vera as both a prig and a fool.

"I pressed his hand and said 'Yes.'

. . . . . .

"I went back to Gower Street after that meeting. I was in wild spirits. For years past I had not felt so happy, or so light of heart. I had never imagined I cared so much for Jack till I saw him again. I had loved and *thought* I loved other men, but for no man yet have I experienced the feeling that he had aroused. And the knowledge had sprung upon me so suddenly. I could scarcely realize even now that I was the slave of a passion that left me again at a man's mercy, that would make for me '*la pluie et le beau temps*' of days to come, that threatened the old sweet wild rest-

less torments at once so desired and undesirable, that mean—Love.

"Love, just love, pure and simple. I asked no more—cared for no more. I only wanted Jack to love me and I wanted to allow myself to love him. How idyllic and simple it sounded! How *young* it made me feel . . .

"Young! Good God! I, with my stained life behind me—I who had been wedded, widowed, divorced, to feel *young!* I laughed in bitter mockery of myself—the true self, the self that I knew as no other soul in the world knew it.

"For a moment the old hateful recoil shook me with its old terror. Life for me was full of risks and uncertainty. I had no right to entrap this strong honest young heart, no right to lead him on to the shame and misery and remorse that could alone be the result. Better far to let him go—he was young, life was all before him. He would meet women fairer, worthier, better . . . Ugh! the old cant. How well one knows it! Just as if all the fair, worthy, estimable women in the world ever seem the same to a man as the *one* woman he desires, and on whom his heart is set. And Jack's heart is mine, I feel sure, and I—love him madly, desperately. I won't fight against fate any more.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN AWKWARD MEETING.

"By the time I had had a cup of strong tea I had again recovered my spirits, and recklessness was in the ascendant. I selected a becoming though essentially quiet costume, and my appearance was sufficient to excuse a fair amount of vanity. But it is a mistake to suppose that because a woman knows she is handsome, she is therefore vain. Nature has so constituted the sex that we are rarely satisfied with ourselves, however much admiration we may arouse. A fair woman envies her *brunette* sister, and *vice versa*. A classic beauty longs to be *piquante*—a piquante one to be classical. The tall slender figure envies the plump proportions of her rival, and the plump charmer covets the length of limb and grace of carriage denied herself.

"To-night in spite of Lutie's fervent admiration and the flattering picture presented by my cheval glass I was mentally contrasting myself with that graceful, golden-haired girl who had

been Jack's companion in the picture-gallery —a cousin, he had said. That charming and convenient relationship which excuses so much and demands so little.

"However, by the time the hansom rattled up to the door and I heard the welcome knock I was in pretty good conceit with myself. Had I needed assurance of my satisfactory appearance Jack's first glance gave it me. He said nothing, however, which showed his good taste.

"'I was thinking of taking you to Previtali's,' he said. 'They give you a rattling good dinner there, and it's so convenient for the theatres. Have you any choice?'

"'None whatever,' I said gaily. 'I am quite content with yours.'

"I knew Previtali's well. I had dined there in my honeymoon days—and since then with D'Arcy. I hoped none of my old friends would be there. But even if they were, none were likely to know Jack. As for what they *thought*, I had long passed the stage of caring for that. I knew no one was 'straight' and no situation innocent, to their limited and degraded minds. I was just in one of my worst and most reckless moods. 'Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die,' was the feeling uppermost in my mind. 'Come what

may I shall have had my day' as our refined Laureate puts the same sentiment. I would take this one good hour which Fate had sent me and let to-morrow bring what it might.

"We soon rattled off to Leicester Square in the hansom Jack had kept waiting,—to the envy of Lutie and the boarders who were flattening their noses against the wire blind of the dining-room window, under the impression that the darkness of the night concealed them. We did not speak much on our way. I was too happy, and Jack—well, I cannot answer for him but he looked radiant enough.

"The dining-room was fairly full when we entered, but Jack managed to secure a table in a quiet corner. I chose the seat facing the room. He sat with his back to it. I had reason to be thankful for that arrangement before the dinner was over.

"Everything was admirable, and Jack was gradually subsiding into that more than amiable and spooney condition characteristic of good digestion, perfect cooking and choice wines which so often leads man into mischief and renders him such an easy prey to the 'wily' sex. We were at dessert, coffee and liqueurs, when the stir of a new arrival made me look across to a neighbouring table. I pray my

nerves were under control, for who should face me in the glow of the shaded lamps but—D'Arcy and Rosalie Brunêt. Swift as thought my eyes fell on my plate and I toyed with the grapes and went on talking with as much unconcern as I could summon to my assistance. But for one brief moment I felt *murderous*.

"All the wrong that brute had done, all the misery he had caused me rose like a choking flood and swept all pure and better emotions away on the tide of its black memories. And with this man—this arch fiend—was my bitter enemy, the woman who had sworn to injure me.

"What mischief were they plotting, I wondered! What had brought them together? They had not seen me, but I knew they were bound to do so soon. From under my lashes I noted Rosalie's faultless toilette of black *faille* and lace—the gleam of diamonds (Parisian, I suppose), the whole irreproachable simplicity which is at once so *chic* and inexplicable, and which only a Frenchwoman understands.

"They seemed in earnest conversation. There was no flirting—no little *minauderies* at that table. Business pure and simple seemed to have brought them there and they proceeded to discuss it with all seriousness. Rosalie spied me first. I saw her start—and then

say something to her companion. I had prepared myself by that time. I met his surprised glance calmly and unconsciously, without a sign of recognition. I saw the old hateful look in his eye—the old hateful smile on his thin lips. How diabolically handsome the man was! No wonder women——

"Jack spoke to me here and I arrested my vagrant thoughts and answered him trying to forget that obnoxious presence. But some fatal attraction made me look again. He was watching me. As our eyes met he raised his glass, touched it with his lips, and deliberately—*winked.*

"The hot blood that rushed in a burning tide to my face seemed suddenly reflected in Jack's. For the first time I remembered he faced the mirror which reflected those opposite tables. He must have seen the incident.

"He half turned—his eyes ablaze with fury.

"'Who's that d—d cad? Do you know him?' he exclaimed.

"I was terribly alarmed. 'For goodness' sake, don't make a scene,' I implored. 'I daresay he's drunk, and thought I was looking at him.'

"'You were,' said Jack wrathfully, 'I saw you in the glass.'

"'You are mistaken,' I answered coldly. 'I was looking at his companion, and when I tell you who *she* is you won't wonder at my curiosity.'

"He turned round again and faced me enquiringly.

"'Do you remember,' I said, in a low voice, 'the Frenchwoman who gave evidence at the inquest on Mrs. Oldreeve?'

"'Yes—you don't mean to say——'

"'That is the woman. She was Mrs. Oldreeve's maid.'

"'But who is the man?'

"'Oh, some valet I suppose,' I said indifferently. 'Doubtless he mistook my interest for admiration. I suppose he has had more champagne than he can stand.'

"'Still,' said Jack, 'I'd like to let him know I'll have none of his insolence.'

"'Hush, hush, for goodness' sake,' I implored. 'I have such a horror of scenes. What good can it do to make a fuss? We've finished our dinner now. Let us go.'

"'With all my heart,' he said eagerly. 'We'll just be in time for the Comedy. 'I've got a box.'

"He had sent a commissionaire to secure seats at one of the adjoining theatres while we

were dining, and the man had returned a few moments before. I rose with alacrity and he helped me on with my cloak, then paid the bill, and we left the restaurant without passing the obnoxious table or giving another glance at its occupants. But all my evening was spoilt. The barometer of my variable spirits sank lower and lower. Hawtrey's inimitable 'lying' could not rouse a smile, and Lottie Venn's witcheries could not beguile me into forgetfulness. All the old hateful past was back with me again. The smirch of its blackness seemed thick upon my soul—the memory of its degradation weighed upon me like Christian's burthen as he waded through the Slough of Despond.

"I was wading through my slough once more, I, who a brief hour ago had deemed it possible to forget—to blot out the old hateful past—and live life anew!

. . . . . .

"I think Jack was puzzled by my changed mood. It chilled his own ardour and made him as depressed and constrained as myself. Before the piece was over I signified my desire to go home. He rose at once. His clear eyes looked concerned and wistful as they met mine.

"'I am afraid,' he said, 'it has been a very stupid evening for you.'

"'It has been delightful,' I said. 'But I think I'm out of sorts and out of spirits. I have had a great many worries lately, and I suppose that they're beginning to tell upon me.'

"He said nothing—*then*, only gave me his arm and we went down the staircase and in another moment were whirling through the gas-lit streets on the noiseless tires of my favourite vehicle. Suddenly he bent forward and took one ungloved hand in his own warm one.

"'You make me so unhappy,' he said. 'I can't endure this sort of suspense. I thought you cared for me a little at Coombe Abbot—but since then you've kept me without a word. You know I love you, Nina; can't you give me a word of hope?'

"The magnetism of his touch thrilled me. I left my hand in his strong warm clasp and vainly strove to calm myself and answer him rationally. Something in me stronger than myself formed my words, and they were spoken irreclaimably before I could help the impulse.

"'I do love you—but——'

"'No *buts* or *ifs*, for God's sake,' he cried,

impetuously. 'I only want to know *that.* Nothing else matters.'

"How young he must be to have said that, I thought.

"I felt my heart contract. The hateful facts of my hateful life arrayed themselves against his trust, against my own desires; but I could not tell him—not then.

"I wonder is a woman's last love dearer to her than her first? I think so. Life is slipping on to that hateful borderland where lie the graves of youth and beauty. Time is her friend no longer. The man who loves her knowing these things must love her for something deeper than mere personal charms, and she feels the value of that love now as she never could have felt it when her heart held no memories and love was still ideal.

"What a struggle was going on within me had he only known.

"I heard him speaking. The dark night was all about us, broken here and there by gleams from the street lamps as the cab rolled smoothly along the dark and quiet thoroughfares. His arm was round me—its firm possessive pressure seemed instinct with promise of comfort, and I had been lonely so long. What wonder my courage failed? I yielded

to that gentle strength—I let my head fall on his shoulder. My eyes closed.

"I felt only the burning touch of his lips on mine as the wheels glided noiselessly on through the fog and gloom of the winter night."

CHAPTER XIX.

REMORSE.

December 20th.

"I WONDER what possessed me to take up the old folly of keeping a diary? It is at once an enslaving and compromising habit. And yet—now I have commenced it again—I feel irresistibly compelled to continue.

"It is a relief sometimes to pour out my vagaries, feelings, sentiments and sensations, to a confidante at once so safe and so unexacting. I have vowed again and again I will not do it, and again and again have broken that vow and let my pen be the living witness to my misdeeds or caprices. Sometimes I envy those good placid women who live uneventful lives, for whom Fate has only prepared a useful drab coloured garment warranted weather proof, instead of the fragile, gorgeous tinted thing that covers up the sins and passions and follies of their weaker sisters. And yet—had I my choice—I would choose to *live*, not to stagnate. To have the full sweet

hours—the gorgeous colouring—the reckless delirious enjoyment—the sense of revelling in and tasting every delight and every joy of sense and soul!

"It may be wrong but we are as we are, and I don't know why we should be blamed for being so. The cow chews the cud, the lioness roams the jungle. Natural history classifies both—and talks of the laws of Nature. In like manner the purring cat by the fireside and the fierce tigress of the forest exemplify those laws and no one blames them. I think women are very like—both. Some prefer the fireside, the cream, the comfort: others—the roving life, the tangled woods, the starlit nights, the fierce wild joy of prey, the subtle sense of mastery, peril, danger, escape—all that is tumultuous and emotional. Certainly if I had been an animal I would have chosen to be a tigress rather than a cow. Being a woman——

"Whatever is the use of writing all this stuff? Am I so weak that I keep putting off the evil moment—even here, to my own self, to my one confidante? Bah! Why palter with facts any longer? Let me face the results of my own folly. *What am I to say to Jack to-morrow?*

"I put him off to-night. He was content to

know I loved him, and we left all discussion as to the future until our next meeting.

"It is long past midnight now. Already the fateful 'to-morrow' is with me and I am no more prepared to meet it than I was when I bade him good-night at the door.

"My own position is still my secret. I know I cannot wrong him and I daren't tell him why. I daren't confess to that loyal clean soul of his what a bad woman I have been. I can't nerve myself to see those dear eyes shrink from sight of mine—and watch the change from love to loathing which would be the inevitable result.

"Oh, why did I let myself care for him? Fool to ask myself that *now!* It's too late to draw back. I love him with the last despairing love of a desperate woman. Fate must decide the consequence.

. . . . . .

7 p.m.

"The old routine of the day is over. I said nothing to Rosalie about that *rencontre* last night. But I did not like the look in her eyes or the sneer with which she greeted me. Of course she knows my story now—D'Arcy would have told her. It is only another instance of his low mind to associate himself with

such a creature—in public. I feel humiliated at the very thought that I ever allowed myself to be duped by him; of all he has cost me, of the harm he might still do me did he choose.

"At present I am quite in the dark as to his intentions, but I confess I don't feel at ease. The man is treacherous. I have proved that before, and I cannot believe he has resumed the intimacy with Rosalie Brunêt without some strong motive.

"The weary day is over. I am alone and waiting for Jack. He is to be here at half-past eight, and I am no more prepared what to say to him than I was when we parted last night. Shall I trust to my happy-go-lucky Irish inspiration? We are not so much liars as inventors, and exaggerators. A plain bold fact looks so much better with a little fanciful embroidery about it. But alas! what embroidery can I put to the ugly truth that I am a divorced woman not yet legally freed from an obnoxious tie!

"*There are always the papers to refer to* and he could read the whole case for himself, the moment I mentioned my real name.

"But why need I mention it? The written words show me a loop-hole of escape. Shall I take it? Let me think. Ah, too late . . .

the sound of wheels—the bell. Jack is here already. Chance must decide.

. . . . . .

Night.

"Two hours ago and I was in his arms listening to the sweetest tenderest words that ever were balm to a heart so bruised and aching as mine. Two hours ago he was entreating me to marry him—fortune, name, position, wealth, were all at my feet and I—could not accept them.

"I've been a fool but I've been honest. It's a poor satisfaction now. I could almost tear out the tongue that betrayed me, the weakness that overcame me, for—I've lost Jack. Lost the fondest, truest-hearted lover woman ever had—lost him for ever!

"Here as I sit, crushed and humiliated, I live over that terrible scene. I see the white change in his face, the shudder in his strong young frame, the recoil from my imploring hands. And I love him so dearly. I love him fifty thousand times more than I did before I spoke those hateful words.

"I feel like one long blind on whom a sudden sense of light has burst. But it was a light that showed me my own self, reflected in a man's hurt and tortured soul. The compul-

sion I was under to paint all, to spare him nothing, was the mad reckless compulsion of the tyrant—*self;* that inner, truer self which at rare times flashes out in me and generally puts me to shame.

"Well, I have done for myself now. The worst side of me—the tigress side of which I have before spoken—got the better for once. The more shocked he was the more unsparing and reckless I grew. There was a fierce wild joy in letting the animal leap out of his cage, in lashing it to fury, in seeing it return cowed and beaten by pain—that deep human pain for another's suffering which for the first time in my life touched me more than my own.

"All the lax self-indulgence—the folly and frivolity of years were paid off in that one moment. I had never been a woman of 'good principles.' I had never denied my own desires, but now by some supreme effort I had felt capable of doing both and—I had my reward.

"Let the moralists howl as they may, no wrong has ever yet escaped the penalty of misdeeds: sooner or later it demands the uttermost farthing. Generally at some supreme moment when life is at its fullest and sweetest, the inexorable Shylock demands and presents

his claim. Writhe—weep—implore as you may, you shall not escape him, for the bond is there and the hour of payment also—and Portia is not.

. . . . . .

"Minute by minute—hour by hour the long night lengthens. Crushed—broken—humiliated, I still sit here asking myself why I did this. I might have invented a hundred plausible tales, and spared him the true one. I go over the hideous tragedy that has grown around my life in so short a time—murder—love—jealousy—suffering—and always a woman in it. Ah! The woman whom I loathe and hate to-night, with all my full and tortured soul—myself!

"Well, there can be nothing more now to happen. Surely Fate has done its worst. I, who cry so easily, cannot cry now. I, so wretched and friendless, have no pity left for myself. Whatever cup of suffering is given to drink, be it filled up—running over with its nauseous draught—I shall drink it, and say 'it is deserved.' What I saw in that young face to-day has changed me as no trial or trouble hitherto has been able to do. His life will never be the same again. A woman came into it and has spoilt it all.

"How sharp and hateful is this pain! . . . How my eyes burn and my head throbs!

"All the long dreary night is before me. I and my thoughts to bear each other company. Shall I go mad, or finish that laudanum?

. . . . . .

6 A.M.

"The morning again. The hateful grey foggy morning of a London winter's day.

"I am not dead. I am still hugging my wretchedness to my aching breast. I haven't the courage to kill myself.

"I don't know *what may come after.* No priest or cleric can tell me. The Inevitable End is as much a thing of dread to them as to me—or any other mortal. I will wait a little longer before taking that 'leap in the dark.' How do I know that——

"Away with such folly! If I live it is without hope, without prospects, without peace of mind. It is to see myself still the struggling adventuress — husbandless — childless — with fading beauty and failing health, and broken heart, going down the hill of life unpitied and unloved. A pleasant prospect truly!

"I look back on these thirty years. What have they meant for me? Vexation—trial—sorrows—worries without end. False love—

false hope. The world would say I have seen my best years. My best! God's pity then on those to come.

. . . . . .

7.30 A.M.

"I heard the postman's knock just now up and down the street. I can't tell what feeling prompts me to listen so intently, what presentiment thrills me so strangely. As if Jack would write—as if all that could be said has not been said—as if to him I must not seem the vilest woman on God's earth. Ah me . . . and I loved you so, Jack . . . I loved you as I have never loved any man before. Too well to deceive you—too well to think of *myself*.

"Rat-tat—rat-tat! It is *here*. Shall I obey my impulse and go downstairs to see if there is a letter for me. Bah, what a silly weak fool! as if . . . I must go. I cannot bear the suspense. Mary Jane never brings up the letters. They are always put on our plates at the breakfast table. I will run downstairs and end my misery.

. . . . . .

8 A.M.

"There was a letter from him.

"How my heart beat—how my hand shook as I took it! How long it was before I could

summon courage to open it. And when I did how the letters swam before my dazed and burning eyes—how only one word lived and framed itself before them—'Nina.'

"He called me that still . . . in spite of all! Surely the tears that gushed from my eyes as I pressed that word to my lips, might have washed away the plague spots even of such a heart as mine.

"'Nina,' he said, 'I can't believe it—even now. You have been wronged—you have been shamefully used—but you were not the sinner. I can't believe it and I won't. Let us forget what was said. I *love* you—only you—always you—whatever you are—or may have been. I can't face the future and feel it doesn't hold you, that I shall never hear your voice—see your eyes—feel your kiss again. If I am mad, you have made me mad. I never loved before, but till I saw you I seemed to have never *lived* before. How can I give you up? . . . Is there no way out of it?

"'If you were *free* . . . The world lies all before us . . . We could be happy together, if you only love me as I love you. I can't struggle against this feeling unless you say it is hopeless, and you *can't* say that for I know you love me. A woman who had the courage

to speak as you spoke, can't be a bad woman! I won't believe it. Unfortunate—reckless perhaps, but not what you called yourself, my darling—not what would put an impossible gulf between your life and mine. The fascination you have for me drives me back to you despite all you told me—despite reason—sense—will; despite everything that would call itself a barrier. Say something—do something. Give me only one word—only one hope, however frail to cling to. My heart is broken, but my life is yours—Do with it as you will!'

. . . . . .

"That was all. There were blurred lines—blotted words. I wonder had his tears fallen on them? . . *His* tears. Oh Jack, my heart—that you should weep for one so vile and so unworthy!

. . . . . .

"I put the letter away. How could I answer it. How *dared* I? All my sins stood up and stared me in the face. I wasn't fit to touch his hand, and he—loved me.

"Was it only the mad passion of youth? Would it die out as flame dies after one brief spurt of life? If I took him at his word—if I held out the hope he prayed for, would he not repent and regret for all the years to come?

"I knew myself. He only knew what he imagined me to be. I could give the answer to my own question. He could only wait for the disenchantment of Time to whisper it to him.

. . . . . .

"The weary day went by. I did my work as usual—hating it and hating myself for doing it, but at best it kept me from thinking. I knew the task before me. I knew I must go home and answer that letter. I had left him all day in suspense. It was cruel . . and I shrank from inflicting further pain.

"If only he had been like other men. . . If only I had not loved him so much. That love had grown to giant strength in these past hours. It tempted me as no other feeling had ever tempted me before. And yet—*something* —that unerring instinctive feminine conviction which defies logic, told me that I was not the woman to make him happy—to complete his life. I thought of the fair pure face of the golden-haired cousin, and a jealous pang shot through my heart.

"She would be a better and more fitting wife. Why could he not have loved her?

"The day passed. At six o'clock I left Jermym Street and walked home. I chose the

exercise purposely. I was in the state of mind that demands movement and activity. The answer to that letter weighed on my mind. I could not determine what to make it.

"Did Fate pity, or intend to drive me desperate, that suddenly as I crossed Bloomsbury Square I met Jack Enderleigh face to face!"

CHAPTER XX.

TRUTH IN A LIE!

"My heart gave one quick throb, then sank like lead—and I turned faint and cold as I read the story of those past hours in that haggard young face. He made one quick step forward and then—stopped!

"'What a lucky chance to meet you!' he said hoarsely. 'I was trying to pass the time till I might expect you at Gower Street.'

"Passively I looked at him—passively I let him retain my hand. The quiet old square was quite deserted. We were as much alone as if the great City's life had ceased to throb around us.

"'Won't you speak?' he said at last. 'Did you get my letter? Can't you *feel* how I'm suffering?'

"'I was going home,' I said, 'to answer it.'

"'What would you have said?' he asked.

"I was silent. I did not know what I would have said—now. I had had no very clear idea

before, but his presence confused me so that I could not think. I could only feel.

"He drew a sudden sharp breath. 'My God!' he said, 'how cruel women are!'

"That speech stabbed me to the heart. I knew his pain by my own. And yet to serve him best I must hurt him more. His presence had unnerved me, but it showed me again how impossible was the road to happiness. How vain to think of it.

"'Jack,' I said, trying hard to steady my voice. 'What I told you was true. I can't marry you—I'm not fit to be a good man's wife. If—for a little while I let you forget, some day you would repent and regret. Some day you would turn on me and upbraid me with my past. I know men and I know—love. You are giving me a gift I'm not worthy of. Take it back. Believe me the day will come when you'll thank me for saying this . . . Our lives must lie apart. . . There is no help for it.'

"'They shall not,' he said. 'If—you love me.'

"The imperative note in his voice was like music in my ears. Who that loves does not love also to be ruled, dominated, mastered, by the one power that can master? The sweet-

est triumph of my life was this hour when I saw Fate defied, and Life itself swaying in the balance with—me.

"'I do love you,' I said. 'It is useless to deny it. But I will not have you ashamed of me. I will not allow you to marry me.'

"'I will do it,' he said. 'In spite of you. I am young—I can afford to wait, and I shall wait.'

"I looked at him hopelessly and helplessly. I thought of Justin D'Arcy—of Jasper Oldreeve—and a shudder ran through me.

"'Oh,' I cried weakly. 'It is you who are cruel now. You drive me to desperation. I tell you I can't marry you. It is impossible. Haven't I told you I'm not free?'

"'Money can do most things,' he said doggedly, 'and most men have their price. I will buy your freedom.'

"His words stung me to the quick. The obstinacy of his passion was so strange when I looked at his face and remembered his youth.

"Rage mastered me. I snatched my hand from his and faced him in sudden fury.

"'You insult me!' I cried passionately. 'Am I a slave to be bought?—A thing to be bargained for? I tell you again it is impos-

sible that we can ever be anything more to each other than we are at present. Even if I were free——'

"'Well?' he said eagerly as I paused.

"A sudden thought flashed to my brain—born of desperation I think, so hateful and so vile it was—but for *his* sake I grasped it. It offered escape . . . and the drowning clutch at straws, they say.

"'Even if I were free—' I said unsteadily, 'I could not marry you because—some one else—has a prior claim.'

"He stood like a stone and stared at me with blank unseeing eyes. Then one word escaped him—'Who?'

"'Jasper Oldreeve,' I said, and as I said it the night seemed only to hold the echo of a curse, as he turned and left me standing by the cold iron railings of the square.

"I had done my work effectually at last.

. . . . . .

"Have hours passed—or days—or weeks? It seems all so long ago as I write of it. Such a long, long time ago!

"How tired I am. To-night I must force sleep if it will not come. Heart and brain cannot stand the strain that mine have stood, and not suffer for it.

"The change in myself puzzles me. A few months ago I was a different woman. Nothing —and no one should have stood in the way of my interests. And now all those interests are centred in another life. I don't care about my own any longer.

"And yet—he is only a man. Doubtless he would be as other men have been—once I was his own possession. Surely I know them well enough to distrust all. A year ago how I hated them—a year ago my life was full of planning and excitement—a year ago——

. . . . . .

"A restless night in spite of my draught. I rose feverish and wretched, with aching head and depressed spirits. I could not go to Jermyn Street.

"Madame Garnier is beginning to complain of my frequent absences. Let her complain. She cannot easily replace me and I am sick of the business. God knows I've never had much cause to love my own sex, but I've only had cause to despise them since I went to the 'Parisian Toilet Repository.' Vain—foolish—mean—egotistical! Why do men bother their heads about us?

"Lutie is distressed about me. I won't take her into my confidence. I won't tell her about

Jack. She thinks it is on Jasper Oldreeve's account I am so unsettled and capricious. Jasper Oldreeve! I have my score to settle with him yet. I wish I could see him to-day. I think I would frighten him for once in his life.

December 24th.

"It is so miserable here I almost wish I had gone to Jermyn Street after all. The grey foggy gloom faces me without—the grey blank of my prospects faces me within. Which is the worst?

"Shall I give it up and go abroad again? I have plenty of money now—and there is always Monte Carlo. I should gain excitement if nothing else. I remember when I was there before——

"Oh Jack, Jack! . . . My heart is one *ache* for you. Why didn't I know you long ago, when I was comparatively a better woman? Why didn't we meet when I was free?

"Fool that I am to ask such questions. The past can't be recalled. . . If it could—if it only could—how good and wise we would all be in the future.

"I regret to-day that I told Jack that lie. My freedom might come yet. At any moment I may have a letter from my lawyers to say

the barrier is removed. I could have invented an excuse—I could have put off any question of our immediate marriage. Why was I so honest—and so hard on myself? God, who made woman, can alone answer for her contradictions and impulses! She doesn't understand them any more than she understands herself.

. . . . . .

Xmas Day.

"I had a fire lit in my bedroom and all day I have stayed there—planning, thinking, worrying myself into a nervous headache, and still as far as ever from a decision.

"I can't stay here much longer—that I feel. I should go mad with the sheer wretchedness of my own thoughts. But where to go is the puzzle. Shall I try Monte Carlo once more? Shall I throw myself into the old wicked feverish life?

"A knock at the door. My peevish 'What is it?' results in Mary Jane's sooty face appearing, and the usual grimy apron is intruded holding something towards me.

"I take it with a sudden quick throb of heart that makes me faint and sick. A card —a *man's* card. So dizzy and blind I am I can

scarcely read the printed name. Then I see *Mr. Justin D'Arcy, The Sports Club.*

"I spring up impetuously. 'Why did you not say I was not at home?'

"Mary Jane gives her usual idiotic grin.

"'I did, mum. The genl'man said he know'd better. His business is important and 'e must see you.'

"*Must!* D'Arcy to insist on seeing me—what next, I wonder? Well, I am in a mood that promises an interesting interview. I send Mary Jane down to say I will see him in a few moments and I coolly finish these entries. Then, with one look at my glass, I lock up my desk and leave the room.

4 P.M.

"If I was in a 'bad' mood an hour ago I wonder what I should call my present one? Devilish—I suppose. That man has always had the effect of making me feel I am worse than I believed myself. (Jack is the only man I ever met who made me feel better.) He greeted me with his usual cool airy insolence. D'Arcy never wasted his power of fascination on a woman unless there was something to be gained by it.

"'What brings you here?' I said curtly—taking no notice of his outstretched hand.

"He laughed. 'You're not over polite,' he said. 'But I suppose that's excusable. I wanted to see you. That is really my reason.'

"'Why?'

"'Won't you sit down? It is so uncomfortable talking to a person standing. And —really—you ought to be more agreeable. I've brought you some good news. Don't look so scornful. It's true. Will you just glance at this paragraph?'

"He handed me a newspaper as he spoke. I saw it was a foreign one. I looked at the marked paragraph. It narrated an accident at Marseilles. The usual boating accident. Two gentlemen—an Italian and an Englishman—had gone for a sail in defiance of warnings—a sudden squall—boat upset—both drowned—the bodies not yet found. Names——

"No wonder I started and cried out incredulously. The name of the Englishman was Clement Garbett.

"The paper dropped—he stooped and picked it up.

"'Sad—isn't it?' he queried coolly. 'Only it will save us a lot of trouble. You needn't worry about the decree now——'

"'*Us.*' I looked at the handsome audacious face and my heart contracted with a sudden fear.

"'It's quite authentic,' he went on, folding the paper as he spoke. 'I took the trouble of ascertaining that. I've a friend who knows the English Consul and he made all enquiries. The description and name leave no doubt. It was Garbett who was staying at the Grand Hotel—who made friends with this Italian Count—who was in that boat when it capsized.'

"'Clement was a good swimmer,' I said absently.

"'The best swimmer wouldn't have much chance in one of those storms,' he said. 'I know that sea well. . . Besides, every enquiry has been made. . . if he had escaped some one would have known. It happened three weeks ago.'

"I drew a long deep breath. I was free once more. Heaven knows I had suffered enough at that man's hands to make me welcome such freedom. And yet, did I envy or feel sorry for him lying there under those deep dark waters?

"'I thought I wouldn't tell you till I was sure,' he went on. 'When I saw you the other night though, I determined not to delay. You see, I consider I've a prior claim to you —and it's time you remembered it.'

"My eyes looked at him steadily from head

to foot. 'If you've only come here to tell me *that*,' I said, 'you are merely wasting your time and my patience.'

"'Am I?'

"He seated himself at last and leant back, laughing softly. 'I think you will change your opinion shortly,' he went on. 'You see I have it in my power to make things rather unpleasant for you with your new—friend.'

"The sneer was so hateful—the look so insolent—that if I had been a man I should have struck him to the ground.

"Being a woman I lost my temper.

"He waited till my storm of invective and accusation was over. Words could not pierce his armour, nor reproaches sting. He was well used to both. When I was exhausted he spoke.

"Shall I humiliate myself even *here* by transcribing that speech—shall I even to my own eyes paint the thing of shame and mockery he made me seem? No . . . the smirch and defilement of it is still upon my tortured heart —Let it lie there. Of course, I saw his purpose at last. It was the old story. He wanted money—badly—desperately. I stood in the proud position of the goose with the golden eggs. He would allow me to marry Ender-

leigh if I promised him a sum down on my wedding day and an income thereafter to be decided. He was perfectly well acquainted with the young man's position and prospects, and could calculate his chances to a degree.

"'I could see he was gone on you,' he went on, with brutal candour. 'And I wouldn't stand in your way if you'll agree to this. Come—is it a bargain? We've stood to each other through worse things, you know.'

"My rage had evaporated. I felt nothing now but hatred and contempt.

"'A bargain,' I said, 'with *you?* . . . Not if my life depended on it. If your time is of any value you had better not waste it here. Allow me to wish you good morning.'

"I rose. He did the same.

"'Is that your last word?'

"'It is.'

"'Then I'm d—d if I don't go straight to Enderleigh and tell him your story. We'll see if he'll marry you then, my lady!'

"'It will be waste of time,' I said coolly, 'to make that call. Mr. Enderleigh has heard my story—already.'

"He started. 'I don't believe it,' he said. 'He's not the sort of man to put up with a woman like you.'

"(Oh! the stab and pain of that speech—the bitterness that could only acknowledge its truth.)

"'I won't argue that point,' I said. 'I tell you again you can give no information to Mr. Enderleigh that will be any news to him, and if it is any satisfaction to you to hear it—I have not the slightest intention of marrying him—or anyone else.'

"'Stop,' he thundered. 'Are you mad—or a fool? Throw away a chance like this—deny yourself position and wealth? Why, he'll come into £10,000 a year at his father's death! You're lying to me—I don't believe you.'

"I laid my hand on the bell.

"'You are acquainted with Mr. Enderleigh's address,' I said. 'Go and ask him if I have spoken the truth, or not.'"

CHAPTER XXI.

A TANGLED WEB.

"Oh, these men—these men! What am I to do among them all? . . . The insane passion of Jasper Oldreeve—the insulting *chantange* of D'Arcy—the wasted misplaced love of Jack Enderleigh—all surround me at one and the same moment. Material enough here for a drama if one ever dared paint real life for the stage. No wonder I feel distracted—no wonder nerves and spirits are suffering.

"It is dreadful—it is unbearable. And the worst of it is I see no way out of it.

"Lutie has been up worrying and fuming round me for the last hour. Finally I lost my temper—and she beat a retreat. She is afraid I shall throw up my present employment in one of my fits of recklessness and then—well, Heaven knows what will happen then. I hardly care.

"If that man spoke the truth, I am free, but what is the use of freedom now?

"I have burnt my boats behind me. Nothing can clear me in Jack's eyes—nothing can make

me worthy of him. Our lives lie apart for ever—and mine seems to be no longer worth living. I shall be ill if this strain continues—I feel it. Perhaps it is the best thing that could happen.

"Now for my drops and to bed.

"I am so worn out body and mind that I can't even *think*, much less write rationally any longer.

January 4th.

"A long gap. The so-called Christmas holidays are over. I spent them in bed in a state of collapse that almost threatened serious results.

"However, my good constitution triumphed and I am once more fit for the 'work-a-day world'!

"No one has troubled me for this past week, neither my two evil geniuses—nor my *one* good one. Heaven send they have forgotten me—but that is hardly possible.

"I went to Madame Garnier's as usual this morning. Rosalie was not there. About eleven o'clock a lady was shown in. The page gave me her card. I read:—

Mrs. Icarus B. Planefield,
Washington,

and was enlightened.

"An exquisitely dressed little woman with the grey hair and premature wrinkles that characterize most American women, advanced to meet me.

"She spoke to the point and without ceremony.

"'I've heard so much of this establishment, I thought I must just give a look round while I'm in London. Are you the principal?'

"'No,' I said, 'I am Madame Garnier's partner. What can I do for you?'

"She laughed. 'Well, if you could fix me up to look twenty-two instead of thirty-five I'd be obliged. But I'm not going to ask you to do it. I hear that Madame Garnier has a wonderful specific for wrinkles. Is that so?'

"'Yes,' I answered, looking wonderingly at the fine network of lines in the clear soft skin —pale in hue and velvety in texture as a tea-rose. 'But it is a long and complex course of treatment.'

"She laughed again.

"'I suppose it is. We're awful fools, we women, to bother our heads about our appearance. We're bound to go off. There's no help for it. Look at me—you wouldn't think I was the beauty of New York a few years ago —would you?'

"'I have no doubt,' I said, 'that you were. But your countrywomen don't wear well. We English get the better of you there.'

"She looked at me thoughtfully and critically. 'You're right,' she said. "Why, you haven't a line on your face yet, and your hair is just lovely. I suppose it's impolite to say it, but I'm just dying to know if you're older than I am?'

"'To be frank with you,' I said, amused by her candour, 'I am just over thirty.'

"'Five years difference,' she said, thoughtfully. 'How much five years can do!'

"I offered her a seat and explained that Madame Garnier would be free to see her in a quarter of an hour. She unfastened her veil and removed her hat.

"She was very pretty. The grey hair was exquisitely dressed—the delicate brows and azure blue eyes and pale skin were, to my mind, a thousand times more charming than any meretricious subterfuge. Against my own interests I spoke:—

"'What a pity,' I said, 'to do anything to yourself.'

"She rose. 'Look here,' she said, approaching the glass.

"I followed. She raised the skin of her

forehead with two fingers, stretching it upwards towards the soft grey hair. All the wrinkles disappeared as if by magic.

"'Now do you see,' she went on, 'I want a tonic or something to tighten the skin. It makes me look a good ten years younger, doesn't it? I'm not going to touch my hair. It's too much bother and dyes smell so horribly, and then—your pillows! Can your Madame Garnier do anything like that for me?'

"'Oh yes—massage and a good astringent will do wonders,' I said.

"She left the glass.

"'Don't think me a fool,' she said frankly, 'but the truth is I've a Romance in my life and I want to see about its conclusion.'

"'Yes?'—I said, somewhat puzzled.

"'It's a charming little Romance,' she went on gravely. 'It began when I was seventeen—broke off a year later and now—I'm free to pursue, or attain it. The hero is a certain Lord Burlington. Perhaps you know him?'

"(I did—and not very favourably, but I merely shook my head.)

"'He was only plain Jim Conyers when the romance began,' she went on. "Young, poor, ineligible. The Wheel of Life has brought me a fortune, and him a title and estate. I

am curious to ascertain what else it has done for him! The Society papers have given me some information. He's not married and he's staying at his country seat, Barton Towers, in Hertfordshire. Well, when I'm fixed up a bit I mean to go and see him, and if he's still of the same mind Fate shall end the Romance. There's my story for you.'

"'It's a very interesting story,' I said. 'I hope it may have a happy ending.'

"Something in my face or voice must have struck her notice, for she looked at me with keen enquiring eyes.

"'You say that,' she said, 'as if—you had known a story without one.'

"'I have known a great many,' I answered.

"'Perhaps,' she suggested, 'your own? Don't think I'm curious. I'm only interested—deeply. Your face is very eloquent.'

"I was silent. I had had no previous experience of customers who found my face anything but an advertisement.

"'Most people,' I said evasively, 'have some trouble or another. I'm not an exception; I hope you may be.'

"Her face took an added shadow of gravity.

"'Thanks for the hope,' she said, 'but even

money wouldn't keep trouble away. You'd be surprised if you knew how lonely I am—how few people I can trust. How often I doubt if I've one real friend among the hundreds of men and women I know.'

"'Yes?' I said, somewhat absently.

"She glanced round the room with approving eyes for a few seconds of silence.

"'It's very artistic,' she said. 'They couldn't do it better in New York. Who designed it all?'

"'I did,' I said modestly, 'at least so far as colouring and arrangement go.'

"'It's a lady's taste,' she said thoughtfully. 'One can't help recognising that—I suppose now that's quite a natural gift to you?'

"'Well,' I said smiling, 'I suppose it is. I'm always told I have a good eye for colour.'

"'How long have you been at this?' she asked quickly, with a glance at the parcels on the table.

"'Only a few months.'

"'And do you like it?'

"'I'm getting rather tired of it—now. It's not exactly edifying or interesting.'

"'I should say not,' she answered. 'You must have a very poor opinion of your sex by this time.'

"'Oh, the other sex is quite as bad,' I said quickly. 'We have nearly as many men as women—though they do most of their beautifying by correspondence.'

"'You don't say so,' she exclaimed quickly. 'I thought Englishmen were superior to vanity.'

"'I'm afraid human nature is the same the wide world over. Did you expect to find England very different to—Washington?' with a glance at her card.

"'Well, I did. We Americans don't allow we're beat easily. The city we honour by our residence is always the best in the world. London is surprising—but it isn't beautiful. In fact I think it hideous. But there's the interest—we don't run to that. Only it's a pity your architects and surveyors had so little taste and so little space. I always feel cramped here. Your streets are too narrow and too full—and your houses too small and too crowded.'

"At this moment the door of the inner room opened, and to my regret Madame Garnier appeared.

"I explained what was required, and after judicious examination she professed herself quite capable of producing the desired effects

in a month. A daily visit for the first week—then alternate days till the cure was complete.

"Mrs. Icarus Planefield agreed at once—gave her cheque for the sum required and then made an appointment for the next day.

"'I hope we'll be able to continue our conversation,' she said to me. 'It was just getting interesting. I suppose you're here most days?'

"'Yes,' I said, 'but I don't perform the toilet duties. I leave them to Madame Garnier.'

"'I see,' she said, with one of her shrewd glances. 'But you're a good advertisement of them.'

"She shook hands and then rustled off—her perfumed flounces and sparkling jewels scattering fragrance and lustre as she moved.

"It was long since I had felt so interested in anyone. She had almost made me forget my troubles for a time.

January 7th.

"Three days and nothing to chronicle except a note from D'Arcy apologizing for his rudeness and begging me to reconsider the subject.

"He pointed out the advantages of a marriage with Enderleigh in glowing colours—

and professed to be quite disinterested in the matter. He ended with a cool request for fifty pounds. I took no notice of the letter. I don't care for his threats now. A month ago had I dreamt that freedom was at hand I might have acted differently. I have given strict orders to Mary Jane that I am at home to *no gentlemen* for the future, no matter what they may say.

"However, I hardly fancy D'Arcy will call again.

"The more I see of my American friend the more I like her. She is so novel—so entertaining—so bright. It is quite refreshing to meet a woman like her after the awful specimens I have had to entertain at Jermyn Street.

"She told me this morning that Lord Burlington had gone abroad—to the Riviera the papers said.

"'I think I shall go there too when I'm fixed up,' she went on laughingly. 'Your English winter isn't inviting. I haven't seen daylight for a week and I never come in without a mask of smuts on my face. If soot's good for the complexion London women ought to take the cake. I've never felt clean since I left Washington.'

"I was silent. I was reflecting on something

her words had suggested. A somewhat wild project, but it looked inviting.

"Meanwhile the days drag on and life is as monotonous as ever.

. . . . . .

January 11th.

"Talk of telepathy and thought transmission, I could almost believe in it.

"This morning Mrs. Planefield was rather before her time and I had a quarter of an hour's chat with her. We have an extra room now, so that Rosalie does not interfere with me.

"Mrs. Planefield seemed somewhat thoughtful and quiet—for her. At last she told me with almost startling abruptness the subject of her consideration.

"'I've been thinking,' she said, 'how I'd like to have you for a companion. We get on so well—and I've taken a real liking to you. I wonder whether you'd give up this place to come to me. I'd treat you entirely as a friend and the nature of our compact would be a matter between ourselves. Of course you make a lot of money at this business—but I'm prepared to give you any terms you like to ask. You speak French and German so well that you'd be invaluable to me.

Besides, anyone could tell by your manners that *you* know what good society is. I can't think why you've thrown yourself away on a life like this!'

"The offer was so tempting, so entirely after my own heart that I could scarcely credit she meant it. My first impulse was to say: 'Yes' without an instant's hesitation. My second—to tell her that I should be doing her a great wrong by accepting the position. If she knew my story . . . if that hateful past were to crop up—how disgusted she would be!

"'You do not seem to care about the prospect,' she went on—as I remained silent. 'I suppose you think you'll lose your independence. I promise you I'll respect it. You see I've only my dollars to back me up. I haven't the birth and breeding that you possess—I could see *that* with half an eye. I wish you'd think the matter over. No one—beside our two selves—shall know that you're anything but a friend accompanying me on my travels!'

"(A friend! a nice respectable friend I should be for any woman!)

"'I should like it immensely,' I said at last. 'But——'

"'Oh, no *buts!*' she exclaimed, eagerly; 'I'm very self-willed, and I always get what I want.

Perhaps you're afraid of meeting people who have known you *here* . . . that won't matter a pin's head to me. It's *you* I like—you yourself, and when I do take a fancy to a woman—well, I'm staunch, I tell you. I wish you'd say yes, right away, and give up this shop. You're looking ill and fagged and you want a change. You're not under a penalty to Madame if you leave, are you?'

"'No,' I said, 'we have only a verbal agreement, and the business is so well established that I can leave her to manage it very well.'

"'Then say it's a bargain,' she exclaimed eagerly.

"But still I hesitated. Those men. . . . if we came across any of them—if she heard anything!

"'I want to be a success,' she went on again, 'and I'm sure you could help me. You've taste, style, and tact. I've—well, only my dollars and my American slang. They seem good enough for the general public—but I want to please someone besides the general public. You might say it's a bargain. I'm awfully gone on the idea. It's haunted me all night.'

"I laughed. Not very mirthfully I confess. I was only wondering what fresh freak of Fate this was, and finding some entertainment in

speculating on a fresh experience. Should I risk it? It was a golden chance—and it offered me escape from D'Arcy—and perhaps from Jack Enderleigh.

"'I will consider the matter,' I said at last, 'and let you know to-morrow. Will that do?'

"'It'll have to—I suppose,' she said discontentedly. 'But do make up your mind to say —yes. The plan appears to me so entirely delightful, I can't bear to think of its falling through.'

"I looked at her. After all she was only a rich American. Her reputation couldn't suffer very much and I so loathed Jermyn Street and my present life now.

"Probably in six months' time I should be equally tired of her life and her dollars. Still——"

CHAPTER XXII.

A PLUNGE INTO FRESH WATERS.

"WHO hesitates is lost. I have hesitated, questioned, debated the subject of my American friend's proposal from all points. Finally I've resolved to accept it.

"I'm sick of being unhappy—of moping here—of constant dread of meeting D'Arcy—of a renewal of Jasper Oldreeve's suit—of . . . well, of everything that means my present life, so I shall try another. If I were a younger woman—if I were the girl I once was—I should be breaking my heart and spoiling my eyes over my misery.

"Grief is a luxury to the young. But as the years bring fresh demands we care less to indulge in it. I, at least, feel I cannot afford it any longer.

"I have never considered people or their feelings very much—why should I begin to do it now? I find they are rough enough on me when they get the chance. Why shouldn't I brave this out and go to the Riviera—which of course means Monte Carlo. Even if I do

meet objectionable acquaintances—with memories—I can face them on my own merits and the unexceptionable position I shall occupy.

"I shall go to Jermyn Street to-morrow morning and when my charming American asks me if I'm going to accept her offer I shall say 'Yes.'

January 15th.

"I have said 'yes'—and Mrs. Planefield is delighted. I have *carte blanche* to order what I please at Russell and Allen's although we shall stay at Paris *en route*.

"Does the heaviest heartache prevent a woman taking an interest in dress? I doubt it.

"What a treat for Lutie. She shall come on my shopping expeditions with me. I shall even go to the extent of presenting her with a new gown for herself. She sadly needs one, poor thing! and the Captain has not proposed —yet.

. . . . . .

"In a fortnight we shall leave.

"My spirits have begun to improve already. The person who is disagreeable in the matter is Madame Garnier. She even talked of 'legal measures'—and obligations of partnership.

"I laughed in her face. I had known better than to bind myself—and she hasn't a case

to go to court with. I can excuse her wrath, however. Complexions—ready made—are not to be found every day. She'll find it difficult to get so good an advertisement as I am again. I consoled her by holding out hopes of my return in a few months' time, besides promising to air her establishment to the Monte-Carloites! We did not actually quarrel—but she professes herself an extremely ill-used person, and when I offered to throw Lutie into the breach she accused me of adding insult to injury.

"Poor Lutie! Why didn't Nature give her a complexion?

. . . . . .

"How refreshing my American is after these tame stiff English women.

"Even the shop-keepers and the 'young persons' of their establishments treat her differently to their ordinary customers. Is it the Almighty Dollar only? I think not.

"Her strong point is her individuality. It is not only that she is surprising—but she surprises one so delightfully.

"'I am a woman of emotions but no heart,' she said to me last night. 'I've never felt anything very deeply, nor trusted anyone entirely. I don't believe in half I see, nor credit

half I'm told. I never had any illusions, so I've never had any disappointments. Taking all these facts—and the more important one that I could buy up half your British Aristocracy myself—it's surprising I've yielded to wrinkles!'

"'They are decidedly improved,' I said.

"'Yes. By moonlight with a white veil on, they might be termed *imperceptible*. I shall choose time and scene for my first interview very carefully.

"'Is it a very long time since you met?' I asked.

"'Haven't you done that little sum in arithmetic I gave you? . . . It's a question of seventeen years and the power of memory. But—unless I look in the glass—I could almost believe it was only yesterday when Mamma was consoling me for a broken-heart much as she had used to do for a broken doll! Perhaps she didn't see much difference. I had only been something to dress and take out. The maternal instinct wasn't very strong in her. It's skipped me altogether. Still that day when they sent Jim (he was only 'Jim' to me and I've never thought of him as anything else) away, changed me from a child to a woman. It's feelings that age us, not years.'

"I agreed to that—well as I bore mine, considering the wear and tear of emotions. I was dining with her at the Langham, where she had a suite of rooms, and this conversation took place after dinner as we sipped coffee and enjoyed the fire while snow and sleet held stormy reign in the world without.

"'Have you ever had an object in life?' she went on meditatively. 'It's a grand thing—Every one ought to have one.'

"'What is yours?' I asked.

"'To get all the enjoyment I can out of it,' she answered. 'And do you know that's a difficult thing for a rich woman. You look incredulous, but it is. You never know your *own* value—only that of your money. You can't be sure of a friend, or a lover. Your servants rob you—and then call you mean. You get nothing at its real value because you're always charged double. And you can't afford simple tastes, or early hours, or anything harmless and innocent, else people will suspect you're mad—or immoral.'

"I laughed. 'I've often thought,' I said, 'people make more fuss over the obligations of wealth than they need. Its first privilege, to my mind, would be that of doing exactly what I pleased.'

"'That's what I used to think. But somehow it isn't possible. You can do some things I grant—but even they have to be founded on previous models. We're all imitations, because we *daren't* cut out a track of our own. There's a cult of civilization that I call the cult of "Everyone Else." We are bound to belong to it. To be rich only means that you wear diamonds like Everyone Else. You dress—well—very much like Everyone Else because your dressmaker daren't let you be unfashionable. You dine late and have a dozen courses when you'd infinitely prefer a fried sole or a mutton chop, because your servants daren't let you be unlike Everyone Else. You go to certain houses—certain amusements—certain pleasure resorts because Everyone Else goes to them too and the law of the cult is exigent in such matters. In fact, you're harnessed to the chariot wheels of Imitation and you can't get away. There are two laws of Life. One for the poor which says "Ye shall suffer"—and one for the rich which says "Ye shall pretend to enjoy."'

"'We have drifted away,' I said, 'from the importance of the object in life. That surely makes a difference.'

"She smiled meditatively. 'I haven't secured

mine yet,' she said. 'He's in the land of possibilities and—zero.'

"'Does *he* gamble?' I asked interestedly.

"'He broke the bank last week,' she said. 'Naturally—because he didn't want money.'

"'That's always the way,' I said, with a petulant remembrance of other days when I had wanted it and the bank had broken me. 'Luck is very perverse.'

"'Yes,' she agreed. 'I've never gambled. I wonder if I should find it so if I did.'

"'Oh, no doubt you would break the bank also. "To him that hath shall be given" is as fixed a rule as any law of the Medes and Persians.'

"She looked at me keenly. 'How bitterly you said that. You've tried "Zero" in your time.'

"'Yes,' I said. 'And with the fate of "him who hath not."'

"She poured me out some green *chartreuse* and leant back amongst her cushions—her eyes fixed on the glowing coals. 'I often wonder,' she said abruptly, 'what your life has been?'

"My face grew warm—the hand that held the tiny *liqueur* glass was less steady than I liked to see it.

"'Why do you say that—now?' I asked in a low voice.

"'I don't *ask* it. I never invite confidence. I prefer to receive it. But your face has a history in it sometimes. It held one just now.'

"A sudden desperate resolve took me by storm.

"'If I told you——' I said.

"She held up one tiny gemmed hand warningly.

"'Don't tell me anything you may be sorry for,' she said. 'Remember I've asked nothing. I've taken you on trust at my own valuation.'

"An odd choking sensation kept me silent. I looked at her steadily. There are so few women one can trust.

"'You are right,' I said. 'I have a history. It is perhaps no worse than many another woman's—on the other hand it is no better.'

"'But it might have been,' she said softly.

"'Oh yes—it might have been. We can all say that when we have arrived at the stage of looking back.'

"'But to arrive at that stage means *living*. I wonder whether I ought to say I'm sorry for you.'

"'No,' I said abruptly. 'I deserve a worse fate than I've met. I might lay the blame at

other doors, but I prefer to keep it at my own —now.'

"'I think you're wise,' she said quietly. 'It may be a satisfaction to blame others for our misfortunes, but it's no remedy for them. Of course there's a—man?'

"I laughed bitterly. 'Of course,' I said. 'Men have been my enemies all my life.'

"'Was it—was he—Mr. Noel Grey?' she asked.

"I started. For the first time in our acquaintance I remembered that she only knew me by my false name. Two impulses were fighting within me: the one to confess myself an impostor—the other, to be wise in my own interests and invent a suitable romance. Was there a middle course? Having said so much could I say no more? I made the attempt.

"'No,' I said. 'Not Mr. Noel Grey—but another.'

"'It was an experience—of course,' she said thoughtfully. 'But you have lived it down, I see.'

"'Oh yes, I have lived it down. That sort of thing must either conquer you—or you must conquer it.'

"She gave a little shudder and drew her chair closer to the fire.

"'I was thinking,' she said, 'what a strange thing friendship is. You meet a person you never saw before and you have to work your way to any knowledge of her—or him—through barriers of conventionality and artifice and constraint. You do not seem to arrive at the *real* person for ever so long. You are studying each other and being mutually false even though you long in your hearts to say straight out—"I like you—let us be true to one another." That,' she went on reflectively, 'is how I've felt about you. It's unreasoning, perhaps—but not unreasonable.'

"I felt the tingling of shame through all my veins. I wondered how any *woman* could have made me feel it. I did not look at her—but I felt her eyes on me, and I could not speak lightly and frivolously as of old.

"We jesters pay a heavy price sometimes for our reputation!

"'You are flattering me too much,' I said at last. 'I'm not worth real feelings. I'm too hollow and too selfish to value or reward them.'

"She shook her head. 'I'm not analytical. I can't go into the why and wherefore of things, but I don't believe you're hollow. Lightheartedness often covers very deep feelings—but they're not for everybody.'

"I was silent. I wondered what she wanted to know. The baseness of deception appeared to me in a new light and I did not like it. Besides *real* feeling—on the part of a woman—was an experience I had not bargained for.

"Again I met her clear eyes, and again that little thrill of shame ran through me. How different she was to other women I had known—how different she was to—me.

"'I've had a hard life—a brutal life—' I cried passionately. 'You couldn't understand even if I spoke of it——'

"'Don't speak of it,' she said softly. 'Your face tells me enough, and if I'm cherishing an illusion, well—it's a very pleasant one. I only want one promise from you.'

"'Yes?' I said enquiringly.

"'Be true and straight to me whatever you may have been to others. I feel as if I could trust you. I don't want to open my eyes on another disappointment.'

"'I promise,' I said huskily. The emotional side got the better of me. I felt the tears rising hot and swift to my eyes.

"What had I done to this woman that I should gain friendship—home—luxury—trust and four hundred a year for the mere utterance of two words?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

ROMANCE VERSUS REALITY.

HOTEL DE PARIS,
MONTE CARLO.
February 10th.

"A LONG gap in my Diary. Indeed I have more than once resolved that I would write no more in it. But I have broken the resolution with less excuse than I have had before, for I am neither lonely nor friendless any longer.

"I have broken it because I want to see 'how the story ends,' as the children say. In reading over even this short record of my life I cannot fancy that Fate intends to leave it unfinished.

"Life has many breaks and interludes, but Time has a way of rivetting broken links—uniting parted friends—ameliorating sorrows. I am going to see if Time will do me any of these services.

. . . . . .

"I could transcribe many of the conversations with Bertha Planefield as interesting to me as that one already written down, but—

they don't materially affect the records of daily events and may be dealt with generally.

"Our journey here was of course a 'royal progress' so far as comfort and luxury went. We knew neither fatigue nor trouble. Ah! marvellous magic wand of the nineteenth century —money! What wonders you can perform!

"One thing that always strikes me about my American friend is her marvellous enjoyment of everything. Scenes—places—people —incidents all seem as novel and as interesting to her as they would to a child—taking Life as a new fairy tale.

"She is full of enthusiasms, and I, with my fortunate Irish capacity for enjoyment, am always ready to share them or let myself be carried away on the current of her own vitality. She is never tired—never cross—never wearisome. Surely these are cardinal virtues in a woman—and such a rich woman too.

. . . . . .

"We arrived at Monte Carlo last night.

"For the first time her spirits seemed to flag. An unwonted gravity took the place of her usual light and laughing gaiety. She looked at this lovely nook nestling amongst olive woods and orange groves—circled by the bounty of hill and sky and sea, with thought-

ful eyes that seemed to enquire of it—'What have you in store for me?'

"With my knowledge of men and life I should have said to her—'Don't expect too much.'

"Lord Burlington is staying at Nice but he drives over every day to the Casino.

"We are going there this evening. I confess to feeling very nervous as to whom I may meet. I shall require all my panoply of assurance to face 'old friends.'

"If ever I've had occasion to ask myself that 'Auld Lang Syne' query as to the advisability of auld acquaintance being forgot,—I've never hesitated to say 'Yes.' There are many of mine by whom I should be only too thankful to be consigned to oblivion, and whom I would as willingly forget. It will only be the usual 'irony of Fate' if I should knock up against them, and they should take it into their heads to remember me when I haven't the least desire to call up reminiscences.

. . . . . .

"Mrs. Planefield has just come into my room most beautifully, though very simply dressed, to ask if I am ready for the Rooms. I must close this book until I return.

. . . . . .

Midnight.

"She has just left me.

"Poor little woman! For once she has learnt the powerlessness of money. It can do nothing for her now. Nothing in return for her long years of faithfulness—nothing in return for the love she was ready to lavish on the lover of her youth.

"*He had quite forgotten her.*

"When I think of that scene—when I think of the miserable white face from which I parted a few moments ago, my heart goes out to this woman as it has never gone out to another.

"My own troubles and worries sink into insignificance. Almost—I forget D'Arcy, though his was the first face I saw bent in flushed excitement over the roulette table.

"Yes, my arch enemy is here too, and I am not too well pleased about it, although I assure myself again and again that I have nothing to fear from him.

"But D'Arcy is not engrossing my mind at present. I can only remember that scene in which poor rich unhappy little Bertha played so humiliating a part.

"We walked into the Casino—she and I. The rooms were crowded. People stood three deep round the roulette tables watching the

players. The usual 'Notorieties' promenaded the floor, flashing their diamonds and their conquests before the eyes of Virtue, while Virtue viewed them askance—and perhaps felt a pang of envy at sight of gowns it could never hope to achieve.

"We walked slowly along. Mrs. Planefield full of excited curiosity at the scene. She had never been to Monte Carlo before, and I only once—so we were not *blasé* or indifferent to its attractions.

"Suddenly her hand closed on my arm.

"'He is coming,' she said breathlessly.

"I looked up.

"Advancing towards us was a singularly handsome man; fair—tall—golden moustached—quite Ouidaesque in fact. He was sauntering along with two or three other men and beside him walked a woman. Such a woman! She answered Mrs. Barrett Browning's description in one respect. She simply took 'one's breath away' as one looked at her. Such colouring—such hair—such a figure! I won't attempt to describe her. It was the beauty of flesh and blood, and health and vitality. Beauty aided by the advantages of dress—heightened, but not vulgarized, by Art. Every man's eye turned to her as she moved. A whisper floated

to me—'That is Celestine! *Voilà! Comme elle est magnifique.*'

"'It is still the Englishman then?'

"'*Mais oui . . . Pourquoi non? Il est si vraiment riche . . .*'

"'It can't last much longer . . . don't you know he broke the bank and gave it all to her?'

"These were the whispers floating round as the party neared us—people making way to let them pass as if they were royalty.

"Well, this is an age that has chosen to rank Vice as an aristocratic virtue, and to give its old and young nobility in marriage to the minions of music-halls and *cafés chantants.*

"Celestine was only making hay while the sun shone.

"They were close to us. The Englishman's eyes rested indifferently—unrecognizingly on Bertha. I could feel her quiver and see how white she turned. Then his eyes went back to the lovely glowing face beside him. He passed on.

"She did not utter a word. Her hand rested still on my arm—her eyes looked straight before her. We reached the end of the room. She did not seem to know where she was going.

"'Shall we turn back?' I asked.

"Then she looked at me piteously—like a child hurt and suffering.

"'Let us go home,' she said.

"We turned away and left the rooms, and walked back to the hotel through the beautiful grounds—under a moonlit sky.

"She never spoke until we were in our own room. Then she walked straight up to a mirror and stood looking at herself for a long, long moment.

"At last she turned to me and with one small hand touched the lines on her brow.

"'You see, it was no use' . . . she said pathetically. 'He has forgotten . . . and I feel so old—so old.'

"I was silent. There was something in her face I had never seen in any woman's face before. All its life and warmth had gone. The grey chill of death seemed to have frozen it into a strange and ghostly passivity.

"'I did not think,' I said gently, 'it would be such a shock.'

"She sank down into the nearest chair—and half covered her face with her hands. I remember noting the incongruity of her appearance with the grief that was mastering her, the Paris bonnet—the rich black laces of

her gown—the sparkle of diamonds at her throat and ears.

"When she at last lifted her face her eyes were wet with tears.

"'You will think me so foolish,' she said. 'But when one has had an object in life—for years——' Her voice broke, but she steadied it with an effort and the shadow of a smile just touched her pale lips.

"'I wonder,' she said, 'who *she* was?'

"'A bad woman,' I said indignantly. 'I heard the men speaking about her. . . . An actress from Paris.'

"A red flush rose like a stain to the whiteness of her cheeks.

"'Ought I to be sorry for him—or for myself? It is all ended—there is nothing to look forward to now. And he doesn't even know.'

"'Perhaps,' I said, 'if you told him you were here——'

"'Tell him? . . . . seem to *claim* his remembrance? No, I could never do that. He has forgotten . . . . so let it be. I wouldn't bring him back to me now if I knew I had only to stretch out my hand. My Jim—the Jim I used to know was not the man to court public shame like that man to-night.'

"'But,' I said, 'men are all like that. They think nothing of it. Look at Lord Clancross and Sir Charles Steepleton—and the Marquis of Beersbury—Sir Harry Vaux and scores of others. They've all married notorious women—bad women—and Society receives them. If you knew more of men and the world this incident wouldn't surprise you.'

"She rose and began to remove her gloves with feverish eagerness.

"'Well, it's over at last,' she said. Her voice sounded harsh and forced. 'I wonder what I shall do with my life—now?'

"'There is always something to do,' I said vaguely. 'You may make it very pleasant if you choose?'

"'By spending money for the benefit of dressmakers, jewellers and upholsterers? But that soon palls upon one. I have no special taste to please—no one whose coming or going will make "home" a word of meaning.'

"'I wish you would not look upon this as hopeless,' I answered. 'It might be explained. You know, he has never married.'

"Again that bright flush stained her cheek and rose almost to her brow.

"'*This*,' she said, below her breath, 'is so much worse. The shame and taint of his past

years would be on his lips—in his eyes—in his heart. I could never forget it.'

"'Do you think men are saints?' I exclaimed. 'Did you expect he would have lived as you have lived—on hope and memory. My God! how little you know of life. You, who told me you had no illusions.'

"'No,' she said. 'But I had faith.'

"'It is wasted,' I said, 'on a man. They don't expect and they don't deserve it.'

"But my heart smote me as I thought of Jack's honest eyes. Would any 'Celestine' console him for me, I wonder?

"She looked at me sadly and wonderingly.

"'How bitterly you said that. . . . You have suffered too?'

"'Does any woman escape?' I answered. I *knew* what wrongs were. She—had only looked at their possibility.

"She sighed heavily. 'I will go to my room,' she said in a sudden tired voice. 'You—you won't mind—to-night?'

("*Mind*—I? . . . . the salaried companion. Surely the age of miracles is not yet past!)

"'Can I do anything for you?' I asked entreatingly. 'Or would you rather be alone?'

"'Yes . . . . you see I must get used to it, so I had better begin at once. I almost think

the loneliness of a rich woman is harder to bear than that of a poor one. If I had to scrub floors and wash clothes I should be too tired to think.'

"She left me and I sat on alone—thrown back on my past—on my old loneliness—on my stormy troubled life by this episode in hers.

"She was the only woman whom I had not comforted by the suggestion of laudanum or—champagne—but then she was the only woman I had yet met who could make me feel the shame of such a suggestion.

"The heart may break—yet brokenly live on! Will hers break! Poor trustful lonely little Bertha with her 'object' in life—and that object only a man who could flaunt a Parisian cocotte through the gambling saloons of Monte Carlo after breaking the bank for her sake!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FATE IN THE BALANCE.

Feb. 11th.

"HAVING given so much space to my friend's affairs I feel I am entitled to devote a little to my own.

"I am not surprised to find D'Arcy here. It was always a happy hunting ground of his. But I am uneasy as to what his intentions regarding myself may be. He did not see me in the gambling room. He was too much occupied with his 'system,' for he is one of those imbeciles who believe luck can be controlled—or made subservient to certain rules. I try to assure myself he can do me no harm, that Mrs. Planefield is unlikely to make his acquaintance, living as we do so much to ourselves—but yet, I don't feel comfortable about the matter. Our names will be in the visitors' list published by all the hotels, and Mrs. Planefield's dollars will doubtless be a temptation to him to try and make her acquaintance. Poor Bertha! Between Scylla and

Charybdis indeed, if that shark ever got hold of her as he has a way of doing with women.

"Heaven knows how he does it, but no one can deny his good looks and his power of fascination. I know the value of both to my cost.

. . . . . .

"We are to stay at Monte Carlo a few days longer. Bertha wishes to see the beauties of the place now she is here, and has planned excursions to Roquebrun, Eza, San Remo, and other places less known to tourists or the haunters of the Casino. As a rule people only come to the Riviera to gamble and dress, and amuse themselves in the same laborious fashion that they have done in London and Paris and St. Petersburg. The scenery and surroundings mean no more to them than the *mise en scène* of a theatre means to the actors in the play. But Bertha Planefield is different. Gambling and society—such society as the Riviera affords—*roués*, *divorcées*, titled rakes, fast women, celebrities in *les deux mondes* rushing and competing in the race for notoriety—had no attractions for her.

"'You might know anyone you pleased,' I said to her to-day, as we drove along the Corniche Road in the direction of Nice. 'There is to be a ball at the Grand Hotel next

week. Wouldn't you care to go? Some royalties will be on view.'

"She shook her head.

"'No, I came here with a distinct impression of English society, of stateliness, exclusiveness, order, grace. I find rush, turmoil, excitement, vulgarity. On the whole I prefer Washington.'

"'Yes,' I said. 'The "old order" has certainly departed. Women nowadays will do anything sooner than be considered "slow." There are heaps of them who ought to be out of Society altogether, if they had their deserts. Nevertheless the fact of being able to keep in it, despite any *faux pas*, entitles them to genuine respect. They must be so very clever, or so very rich.'

"She looked at the blue sea thoughtfully. It seemed to suggest something to her, for suddenly she turned to me.

"'Come back with me to America,' she said abruptly.

"I looked at her in silence. The idea was altogether so startling that I could not grasp at once all it might mean. A new world—a new life—the effacement of that hateful past. I felt my heart throb and the blood rush to my face.

"'Do you really mean it?' I said.

"'I do. There is nothing to keep me here. You know why I came to England, and the result. I don't care to remain here now. In Washington I have friends—interests—associations. It would be interesting at least. You would make a sensation there and you would be of such use to me. Promise to think of the idea.'

"'Certainly, I promise,' I said slowly, my eyes fixed on an advancing carriage.

"Like a flash it came to me who were its occupants, even before a mocking smile, a hat raised in greeting, called the hot indignant colour to my face. D'Arcy, Lord Burlington, and another man were in it. They all looked at us, then a cloud of dust alone remained as a memento of their passage.

"'He knew you to-day,' I said to Bertha.

"'Yes,' she said, quietly. 'I think he did.'

"'He will call, I expect. He is sure to recognize your name.'

"She smiled somewhat absently. 'Perhaps he will—but it is too late now.'

"'You mean that even if you had a chance of happiness——'

"'It would not be—that,' she interrupted. 'He is altogether different from what I im-

agined. Two unhappy marriages are more than I can look forward to with resignation. I've not said anything to you since that night —what a long way back it seems—but I don't mind telling you now. It was final. It seemed the end of a feeling that had suddenly found itself without foundation. One portion of my life snapped off short. Nothing could join it again. I feel sore and hurt still, but I know the wound will heal. He cannot help being what he is, but I can help imagining him what he is not. I have thought of it a great deal. . . . I am old—my hair is grey. Any attraction I might have had would only be the attraction of money. That would not content me. It is terrible for a woman to feel her heart is young—passionate—exacting—and look in her glass at a wrinkled face and faded hair. Time is so cruel to us.'

"'And so are men!' I said fiercely, for that smile and look of D'Arcy's had roused a very devil within me.

"'Yes,' she agreed, 'and so are—men. After that first night here I seemed to have left my old self—the self of thirty years' knowledge—behind me. I cannot even fancy knowing it again.'

"'And you think it was the end?'

"'I am *sure* it was. Will you come to Washington?'

"I laid my hand on her arm.

"'I know more of life and men than you do. He will come to see you—you will see him. Ask me *then* if I will come to Washington.'

"For I knew D'Arcy would not scruple to tell him of me, and I knew he would tell Bertha—and then . . .

. . . . . .

"We returned from our drive an hour ago. Their cards were awaiting us.

The Earl of Burlington,
Hotel D'Angleterre. Nice.

Captain Justin D'Arcy,
late 2nd Lancashire Lt. Infantry.

"'Was I not right?' I said to Bertha.

"She stood there pale and thoughtful, holding the cards.

"'I think,' she said slowly, 'we will arrange to leave to-morrow instead of next week.'

"I looked at her quickly, relieved and glad, but uncertain as to whether she meant it.

"'Are you in earnest?' I asked.

"'Perfectly. Will you tell the courier and I will arrange with Félicie.'

"I rang the bell. The attendant answered it and I gave him orders to send up the courier. He bowed and then with a glance at the cards explained that the gentlemen had called but half an hour ago, that they were *désolé* at finding mesdames not at home, that one of them had left word he would return at six o'clock and hoped to find them in by that hour.

"*One of them.* I looked at Bertha—she looked at me.

"'Lord Burlington,' I exclaimed.

"'Captain D'Arcy,' she echoed.

"My eyes turned to the clock. It wanted five minutes to six.

"'The courier can wait,' I said to the polite attendant, 'until the gentleman has left.'

"Bertha said nothing.

. . . . . .

"We did not remove our bonnets but seated ourselves by the window which commanded a view of the bay and the gardens of the Casino. My nerves were strung to a pitch of intense nervous tension. I felt the coming interview was to be momentous in some way. Life had been too smooth and easy of late. Something was sure to happen.

"The slow ticking of the clock was the only

sound in the room. We had no words, no smiles for each other. We simply waited.

"Her fate and mine hung in the balance. It was no time for idle talk.

"The door was quietly opened. In the half dusk I saw a tall figure advancing. My breath came in a quick gasp. It was not D'Arcy.

"I saw her rise, calm and tranquil, as if to meet an ordinary acquaintance. They shook hands, and the waiter brought in a lamp and set it on a small table near the window. Then she turned to me.

"'Allow me to introduce'——she began.

"I hope on this side of Heaven it will never be my fate to read in a man's eyes again the contemptuous insolence I saw in Lord Burlington's. What a blow is to a man, that look was to me. The blood flushed to my brow. I rose unsteadily. I heard his clear well-bred tones.

"'Excuse me, but I wish to speak to this *lady* alone—Mrs. Garbett.'

"Then I found myself outside the door. My castle of cards had once more toppled to the ground.

. . . . . .

"I sat in my room alone, maddened with rage and surprise. D'Arcy had betrayed me,

D'Arcy had told this man my history. The arch-fiend and enemy of my life had risen up once more to destroy another chance! A hate, bitter as murder, was in me. The mean cur who had ruined me once was only eager to do so again.

"The veins in my temples swelled to bursting, the room seemed to swim before me. I glanced at the mirror, half expecting to see some hideous change in my face, but save for the hot flush on either cheek it looked much as ever. How I loathed it—how I loathed myself.

"Let the plain woman thank God for her plainness. She never need learn the brutality of man, never need dread the power of temptation."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DIARY ENDS.

"I HAD ceased to take note of time. I gave myself up to frigid callousness and braced myself to receive dismissal, reproach, even insult. Why should Bertha Planefield be different to other women—women who from the vantage point of unassailed virtue regard the weaker and more assailable of their sex with lofty contempt.

"'She has only herself to blame,' I told myself, trying to picture her under the joint revelations of false love and false friendship. 'She insisted on my living with her . . . After all, there's no harm done. The people whose acquaintance she has made only care for her money. It wouldn't matter to them what she *did* or whom she took up, as long as those millions of dollars were safe, and her gowns came from Worth.

. . . . . .

"She came to me at last. As I heard the handle of the door turn I rose and stood there

facing her. She paused for a moment on the threshold—our eyes met. Then she crossed the room a little hurriedly and came towards me. She was trembling, and there were tears in her eyes.

"'Is it true?' she asked simply.

"'Yes,' I said. I did not ask her *what.* The time for subterfuge and pretence was over. I think as I recognized that I also recognized how heartily sick I had become of them. It seemed such a relief to speak the simple truth at last.

"She said nothing for a moment, only went over to the couch and sat down. Then she motioned to me to take a chair also.

"'True?' she said. 'I can't believe it—that you are a divorced woman . . that you were compromised with Justin D'Arcy—Oh, it is too hateful even to speak of!'

"'There is worse behind,' I said, 'if you would care to hear it. I offered to tell you my history once, but you would not listen. Will you listen now? It is almost as moral and interesting as a page of Zola.'

"She suddenly turned and buried her head in the sofa cushions and began to sob.

"'Oh!' she cried, 'is there no one who is true—no one who is good—clean-minded—

honest-hearted? Oh, what a world—what a world!'

"Her tears touched me. As a rule women don't cry for women, nor expect them to be 'true and good.' Bertha Planefield was almost childish still in her beliefs and her expectations.

"I looked at her half in wonder, half in pity. Was she very foolish? Where had I read about the 'cuteness' of Americans — their surface brilliance and instability of character?

"Suddenly her sobs ceased, she sat up and dried her eyes.

"'You didn't think I was so foolish as to feel anything like this?' she asked. 'I didn't think it either. I can't understand myself. I told you once I had never had any illusions about people, so I ought to have been prepared for anything they might do, or had done.'

"'Yes,' I said bitterly, 'you are rather low down in your class if you have only learnt that lesson to-day.'

"'Theoretically I knew it, practically I did not. I told you once I had heaps of acquaintances but few friends.'

"She looked at me again. I could read her thoughts in her clear eyes. She was marvelling that 'vice was not written on my candid brow,' that sensuality and hypocrisy had not

lent their odious lines and curves to my lips, that my glance could be frank and calm, my skin unwrinkled, my laugh gay.

"'You weep for those who weep,' she said.
'Oh fools! I bid you pass them by.
Go weep for those whose hearts have bled,
What time their eyes were dry.'

"'I think,' she said softly at last, 'I should like to hear your story from the beginning. I refused once; that refusal left you at the mercy of a third person. Oh! there is something *hateful* in a man who takes away a woman's character . . as . . as I have heard yours taken away.'

"I knew then the worst had befallen me. Simple truth suggested itself as a relief. I threw my memory back thoughtfully. I remembered my diary . . . It would serve me at last.

"'I will tell you everything,' I said, 'up to my coming here. You cannot think worse of me than I think of myself.'

"I commenced and rapidly went through the events and incidents that antedate my present journal. I left off where it begins.

"'Now,' I said, 'you shall read the rest for yourself. At least you must acknowledge I have been honest in my confessions.'

"I left the room and brought the diary and placed it in her hands.

"'If you can find it in your heart to say good-bye to me kindly after reading this, say it to-morrow morning,' I said. 'But for to-night, let things rest as they are.'

"She lifted her head as though to speak, but I hurried away. I was stupid enough to feel weak, and almost weak enough to cry. But I knew the time for tears was not yet, and I restrained the impulse.

. . . . . .

"How trite and commonplace a saying it is that we all have our chances!

"The moralist says it to the sinner—the Pharisee to the publican. But as I sit here this dreary evening I say it myself and I know it for truth. I have had my chance. The chance of a good man's love. The chance of a good woman's friendship. I have missed both.

"How ridiculous it seems that I should have expected anything to come of this last venture of mine but failure.

"My life has always been a whirligig, a thing of cross purposes—a warped and crooked stick on which it was unsafe to lean. There will never be a time of smooth waters, a landing in

some peaceful haven, a *rest*—(God! how I long for it now!) after the battle.

"The brute who has been my ruin has spoilt my last chance. My story—commonplace enough—yet bad enough, has been given out to the gossipers of this scandalous place.

"Bertha Planefield knows me for what I am, and oddly enough, I feel more humiliated by her knowledge of the facts, than by the sneers or veiled insolence of the men who have carried them to her ears. She is a different specimen of womankind to Lutie, or Mrs. Oldreeve, or any of the numerous women with whom I have come in contact. So different, that the ridiculous feeling has crossed my mind lately that she might make me a better woman.

"I laugh now as I think of it, but the tears are hot in my eyes and I am ashamed of the laugh ere it has died in the silence.

"What has come to me to-night?

"I hardly know myself. It seems as if an *end* had come to the life I have lived and the self I have known.

"I no longer feel the energy to plot, the zest of successful scheming.

"It seems too late. A noble lover, a true trusted friend, these are not gifts that Fate

throws in one's lap every day, and I have lost both.

"What is there left worth living for? . . .

"I find myself looking at these lines idly traced on scraps of paper, for Bertha has my Diary.

"I keep on writing, writing, writing from sheer inability to sit here idle. I have never been in so strange and so despondent a mood. All the recklessness and dare-devilry have died out of my heart like a fire exhausting its own fuel. I am only conscious of being very tired, and very hopeless.

. . . . . .

"I don't know why I thought of it.

"Was it a last whisper of my evil genius, or the suggestion of a despair that looks its own desperation in the face? I cannot tell. I only know it came as it has come before, the tempting to end all this!

"What is life without love, without friendship, without hope?

"What is the use of my taking up the old struggling, humiliating career? To live in hourly dread of D'Arcy's *chantange* and evil tongue, of Jasper Oldreeve's persecution, of Jack Enderleigh's undisguised contempt?

"There is my old friend in my dressing-

case. A few drops more than the usual dose and then—sleep. Sleep long, unending, eternal.

"I have never thought myself a brave woman, yet I face this idea without a pang of fear. The evil about me is so heavy and so close that I see but one way of escape. No one will care, no one will miss me, except perhaps Lutie. Poor old Lutie! What things we have done, what risks we have run. She will think this an accident. She will never dream that I—*took my own life.*

"How odd it looks! How vivid the words seem. To-morrow I shall not be here to read them.

"I will write *Finis* to this, and seal it up and leave it for Bertha. She must know my story to its end.

"Now for my drops."

. . . . . .

CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO WOMEN IN IT.

MIDNIGHT was chiming when Bertha Planefield raised her head from the last of the closely covered pages which contained so much of the history of Mrs. Noel Grey.

Her whole soul was in a tumult.

So cynical and candid and condemnatory a page of woman's life had never yet been offered for her perusal. Yet there was a gleam of something noble and self-sacrificing underlying those reckless confessions—a redeeming quality, as it were—that refused to be extinguished. They say the worst women have their innocent moments. It is hard to believe in irreclaimable badness. Missionaries and fanatical chapel-goers have found it possible; but the general run of mankind like to leaven that opinion with a little unsectarian charity.

Heaven pity sinners if the justice of Eternity is to be meeted out with anything like the narrowness of the justice of earth!

Bertha Planefield was a large-hearted and extremely resolute person. When she cared for anyone she cared very deeply, and though her wealth and popularity had made her distrustful of "professions" of friendship, she had never ceased to long for a sympathetic companion.

The *inner* loneliness of a very rich woman is a touching, though somewhat unrealizable fact. Bertha Planefield had experienced it fully. The charm of Mrs. Noel Grey was her unflattering frankness, and her genial and unfailing good nature. Added to these the buoyancy and companionableness of the Irish temperament made her doubly attractive. Bertha Planefield had of late indulged in the vision of a Woman's sphere of Usefulness. A *Salon* in fact, comprising social, artistic and helpful elements, enriched by taste, beautified by art, and popularized by the wit, skill, and social knowledge of her Irish friend. Men were but a background to this scheme. The "Two Women" who organized it would be its motive power, and time, tact and all useful help would be lavished upon it.

The ambition may not have been very noble or self-sacrificing, but it would serve a purpose and might achieve a possible good. Unaided

she felt she could not work it out. She lacked the courage and daring requisite for success. A success that did not depend on wealth though deriving all possible aid and *éclat* from such an adjunct.

Was this scheme to be a failure because— She hesitated and her face flushed. She was trying to reconcile the Woman of the Diary with the friend she had been reckoning on. How utterly at variance they seemed.

Affection began to make excuse, and her heart had never been obdurate.

She had cut short Lord Burlington's story with scathing contempt. She had asked him, in fact, whether the company in which she had seen him that fateful evening left him free to judge so severely of any other offender.

To say that a peer of the realm was outraged by such plain speaking on the part of an American citizen, is to say very little.

The casting of stones at the right sinner is a peculiarly British art. Mrs. Icarus B. Planefield had not yet been initiated into its mysteries. Lord Burlington insinuated that certain topics were not discussable in ladies' society and speedily took his leave. The echo of his steps was followed by the echo of a sigh.

It sounded strangely like one of relief.

"How could I ever have cared for him!" said the reality of thirty-five to the romance of seventeen.

Alas! Reality and Romance have asked each other that question too often in this bitter world.

But all this had been very trying to the nerves, temper and feeling of a sensitive woman. It was little wonder that Bertha Planefield sat there weighing these matters in her mind and pondering them in her heart. That heart was clamouring for a hearing, even after the journal had been closed and its contents weighed in the balance of feminine judgment.

"I couldn't send her back to this life. . . I couldn't. It would be mean, cruel, hateful of me," she exclaimed. "After all, she hasn't been so very bad . . . and God knows she has suffered enough for what she has done."

She seized the book and started to her feet.

"I'll go and tell her!" she exclaimed impulsively.

Their bedrooms were on the same floor, divided only by a dressing-room. Mrs. Planefield turned the handle softly, then stood there on the threshold for one brief moment, frozen by the horror of a sudden fear.

The woman who was facing her—was that the woman she had never seen without a smile on her lips, the light and brilliance of youth in eye and cheek?

This haggard, guilty, ashen-faced creature holding in one hand a tiny phial, in the other a glass half full of a thick, dark liquid.

Shaking off the paralysis of inaction with one supreme effort, Bertha Planefield crossed the room and took the glass from those trembling fingers.

"Not yet," she said very tenderly. "Not yet, while you have one woman friend in the world who cares for you, no matter what you are!"

There was a second's breathless silence broken only by one stormy sob as the shuddering figure sank upon the floor.

"Yes, cry . . . it will do you good . . . it is all the relief we have. But, after to-night, let us only remember that we are two women with whom life has dealt hardly, but who are going to face that life afresh and defy the Past."

There was no answer. A blissful unconsciousness had followed that sound of incredulous relief.

Bertha knelt by the motionless figure, loosen-

ing the wrapper at her throat. She was as pale as the senseless face before her, but a passionate thrill of exultation ran through her veins.

"My God!" she cried in her heart. "If I had been one moment later!"

. . . . . .

It is not given to many women to "defy the Past" successfully.

Yet Bertha Planefield had decreed it should be done: and set about doing it after a plan of her own. Perhaps a woman whom evil has not touched realizes its coarseness and extent less keenly than one to whom it has worn no disguise. Perhaps her nature was more compassionate than critical. In any case she felt capable of making an experiment and carrying it to a successful issue.

The commencement of the experiment necessitated an immediate retreat from present quarters. However, when they reached Paris, Mrs. Noel Grey fell seriously ill.

It was scarcely possible that a woman could have lived through the wear and tear of passion and emotion that had been her lot, and not suffer for it.

Mental and physical collapse alarmed her friend for life as much as for reason. It meant

weeks of anxious suspense, of tender watchfulness, of incessant care. But those weeks gave Bertha Planefield ample leisure to review her plans. Life had suddenly become a thing of serious interests.

Up to that awful moment when she had frustrated the rashness of despair, and bid an erring sister live for the sake of their common sisterhood, she had never found any very grave responsibility. Now it seemed to her that she was in some manner responsible for this future, that but for her might have become an irrevocable Past.

Women are so often foes to women that it is little wonder the ranks of the fallen and the desperate are perpetually crowded by new recruits. It is not only the helping hand that is needed, but the hand that gives its help at the right moment and in the right way. A good woman can make other women good more by influence and association than by preaching. But the preaching is easier, and therefore a method more generally adopted.

Bertha Planefield was not a preacher. She was just a woman, faulty, loving, with a bias towards compassionate instead of just dealing. Her sex's vanity and her sex's weakness were not absent, otherwise she had been less purely

feminine. She was more emotional than critical, and the perpetual reasoning and wondering and arguing that make modern women and modern men at once introspective and pessimistical were not faults of her nature.

Life was less complex and therefore better worth living to her than to the analysts and cynics. Half of it had been spent in nourishing a romance to which Man had dealt the death-blow. The other half she resolved should be spent in sober Reality, to which Woman should act as the reviving power.

The wave of reaction had carried her to the borders of an Ideal Friendship. Would it be more satisfactory than an Ideal Love?

. . . . . .

The more she thought of it the more it appealed to her. To aid this frail sister, to reinstate her in the place from which she had fallen, to be to her at once encouragement and example, such was the inspiration of her heart.

That it would be difficult she knew, that it was very noble and very quixotic she never thought.

"Women ought to help each other. They *must* help each other heart and soul or else men will never cease to sneer at them," she told herself.

She felt she was ready to begin, and the feeling lifted her above all the common littlenesses of life, and breathed new and noble influences into her soul.

Brick by brick she built up the edifice of hope, never despairing, never weary even in days when a wasted hand clung to hers, and babbling lips prated the incessant foolish chatter of delirium. The very helplessness of this wicked life appealed to her as neither fearlessness nor independence could have done. She had neither lover, nor husband, nor child, and the future looked cheerless as a prospect. Her heart clung impulsively to this one friend.

"She is unhappy, she needs me," she told herself, and then she would leave the sick-room and read again those self-betraying pages of the Diary. "She need not have told me. . . If she had denied everything I would have believed her . . ." she thought, with that newborn tenderness for a sinner that might almost make a saint, were it ever known to anyone, save just a woman's own heart and to Him who created that heart.

Love is always exacting, but Friendship tests our less selfish capabilities though it has often to wait for its reign till love is dethroned or dead.

In Bertha's case it had suddenly usurped the stronghold of a long-cherished dream. She could say of the man, "He does not need me"—but to the woman her sore heart turned with a widely different sense of responsibility.

Days passed into weeks; then wearily the hours of languor and convalescence lent themselves to the growing needs of returning strength and laid fresh tax upon the patient watcher. She dared not yet speak of the future. Neither hope nor desire looked out from those weary sunken eyes, and a strange reticence sealed the once reckless speech.

What had been faced and reckoned with in those dark days of pain was not known to any living soul, but they had left indelible marks on the character of the woman who held their secrets.

The adventuress to whom life had only meant escapades, excitement, shifts and struggles looked back on that span of reckless years with a horror of herself that was too painful for words. In the tortures of memory she lived her past anew and in so living almost atoned for it.

That one moment when her foot touched

the Borderland of self-wrought crime was an indelible moment. As strength returned and the hundred and one of its daily needs and trivialities imposed themselves again, she shrank even from Bertha's tender eyes and gentle ministry.

It seemed to her that she had no further place among good women, and yet none knew better than herself how utterly she despised the life and temptations and surroundings that were the reverse of the picture.

Her nature seemed shaken to its very foundations by the generosity lavished and the trust so tenderly bestowed upon one so unworthy. It was as if after long sliding and slipping among shifting quicksands her foot at last touched firm ground. She shuddered sometimes when she thought how nearly she had slipped into the quicksands irrevocably. How fateful one moment of time had been in comparison with hours and days of utter recklessness.

"But I ought not to live with her," she reflected, as Bertha's wishes and Bertha's plans were more carefully detailed. "My life is not fit to join with hers."

Restraint made her nervous and unnatural. Glib words no longer rattled off her tongue.

Conversation was an effort and Bertha soon detected it.

The time was ripe, she felt, for explanation. She set herself to the task with a simplicity and directness that were prepared to combat scruples and defy opposition.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"YES!"

THE invalid lay on the couch in her dressing-room. The lamps were lit—and the muffled sounds of the streets broke the stillness within. The world of Paris was on its way to the thousand and one distractions that pleasure has invented.

Mrs. Noel Grey looked at her thin hands and wasted figure, and wondered, half pathetically, whether pleasure and distraction would ever again have any charms for her.

It is these reactionary moods that fill convents and sisterhoods and nursing Homes.

When the door softly opened and she saw Bertha Planefield, she rose from her recumbent position. It occurred to her then that the whole day had passed without a visit from her friend.

"Don't get up," Bertha said eagerly. "You are not strong yet. I know you are better. The nurse says you may go for a drive to-morrow. So I'm come to have a chat with you. Shall I tire you if I talk?"

"Not at all."

But a nervous flush rose to Mrs. Noel Grey's cheek. She felt a crisis was approaching.

Bertha Planefield seated herself on a low chair beside the couch.

"I want, first of all," she said, "to give you back this."

Their eyes rested on the leather-covered book which held such condemnatory records —then met and mutely asked results.

"Then," continued Bertha as she laid the volume of MSS. on the couch beside her, "I mean to have one good talk over things with you. After that we will not speak of . . . of what this book tells—ever again."

Mrs. Noel Grey said nothing. Only one thin restless hand thrust the book away under the loose silk coverlet as if its sight were hateful.

Bertha noted the gesture and the sudden flush that stained the white cheek.

"I am so afraid," she said gently, "that I shall not express myself as I want to. When one feels deeply it is not easy to speak, and I do feel very deeply for you."

"You have been—far too good to me," came the broken answer. "I, too, can't find words——"

"Oh, hush—hush . . . whatever we do don't

let us get tragic," exclaimed Bertha almost sharply. "I'm going to talk common sense and nothing else. How soon do you think you'll be able to travel to Washington?"

"You—I—I mean it is no longer a question of my ability. Circumstances are altered now. I feel I ought not—I cannot accept your offer."

"Circumstances," answered Bertha, "are exactly the same. We are the same women. We stand still in the same position. I offered you my friendship, I cannot take it back and—friendship is but a poor thing if it can't stand some test."

"The test of—this?" Mrs. Noel Grey laid her hand on the concealed book. "It is one from which any friendship might shrink."

"Not mine," said Bertha simply. "The woman who could love and sacrifice herself for Jack Enderleigh sooner than wreck his life, is not a woman whom I could ever mistrust. But she is a woman who needs a friend in her loneliness and I mean to be that friend."

"Don't think I need your assurance—and don't think I can't value such friendship . . . but it would be a wrong to you to associate your life with mine. At any moment my past may crop up again. I have many enemies, and they won't spare me. Remember D'Arcy——"

"He is a brute and a villain. It would be the worse for him if he ever crossed my path. Nina dearest, do not attempt to alter my purpose. I can be very resolute, as you know. I am the mistress of my own fortunes—a childless, husbandless woman. I need a friend—I ask you to be that friend. Together we will make something of life—together we will utilize this burden of wealth that has sown so much misery and distrust around me. Come, Nina—if I have courage, surely you have the same. What can the world do to me that will harm me? What has it done for you that you should regard its opinions?"

"I don't, I never have; but it is for you, Bertha, I hesitate—for you who are a good, pure woman—so different from what I have been."

"But not so different from what you *may* be, Nina. The Future is still yours."

"It is your gift," she answered, with a strangled sob. "But for you I should not be here now. Sometimes I think——"

"I know exactly what you think. It is just what any morbid, ill-used, unfortunate woman would think. I am not going to listen to it. I simply want to announce a decision. In a new world you shall lead a new life—of use—

of good—of beauty. Instead of the extravagancies and follies of wealth we will pursue its uses. We will serve our fellow creatures as well as ourselves. A vast sphere lies before us, Nina—the woman's sphere of helpfulness. Let us join hands in the enterprise. Leave the old life, the false lovers, the cruel spies and intrigues of this past year behind you. The secret of melodrama clings to these pages. Burn them and forget them! Leave Jasper Oldreeve to his fate—I foresee it near at hand. Self-murder, or the victim of that fiend who knows his secret. As for D'Arcy he has done his worst. Your friend of the boarding-house I have been corresponding with. Would you like to know the result?"

"Yes, indeed . . . Poor Lutie—she has had a hard life."

"She will join us when we are settled in Washington as our secretary."

"Oh, Bertha . . . What an angel you are!"

"Nonsense. Wait till I've finished. I am going to give you a disagreeable task. I don't know what you will say to it. I want you to write to Jack Enderleigh."

There was a moment of dead silence. "Why?" came the faint query.

"You owe it to him to tell him the truth.

It is the only reparation you can make for the wrong you did him. Tell him that you are leaving England . . . for ever——"

"For ever, Bertha?"

"Does it sound 'a large order,' as we say? Well, it will be for many years, I hope."

"May I tell Jack of you?"

"Not my name," she said eagerly. "You may say you have found a friend, and that she is about to embark on a scheme which will give you occupation and interest."

"Don't you think it is a pity to awaken his remembrance?" she asked again.

"No. It is simple justice—to you both. Leave a clear record behind you, dear, before you take up the burden of life again."

"And what is this plan—this scheme?" questioned Mrs. Noel Grey.

"It is a scheme that needs Women to help Women. We have begun by helping each other. We must continue. Where our sisters are friendless, desperate, forsaken — there, Nina, lies our country and our work. Yet we shall be happy too. Life won't be all drudgery. Perhaps in trying to better it for others we shall make it brighter and happier for ourselves."

"You will have 'ourselves,' Bertha."

"That," she said, "is what I have been explaining."

"It seems useless to object, you fairly carry one away."

"I should like to do it, I confess. Still if you will say 'Yes'—as a pure formality——"

And with the "tear and the smile" so characteristic of Erin's daughters, Mrs. Noel Grey said it.

THE END.

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